THE SUNDAY FOCUS

Weekly Worship from Gladsmuir & Longniddry Parish Churches
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Today's Bible readings

Psalm 121 ("Assurance of God's Protection")

I lift up my eyes to the hills - from where will my help come?
My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth.
He will not let your foot be moved; he who keeps you will not slumber.
He who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.
The Lord is your keeper; the Lord is your shade at your right hand.
The sun shall not strike you by day, nor the moon by night.
The Lord will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life.
The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in
from this time on and for evermore. Amen. *(NRSV)*

Matthew 26:26-32 ("The Institution of the Lord's Supper")

While they were eating, Jesus took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to the disciples, and said, 'Take, eat; this is my body.' Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, saying, 'Drink from it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you, I will never again drink of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom.'

When they had sung the hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.

Then Jesus said to them, 'You will all become deserters because of me this night; for it is written,
"I will strike the shepherd,
and the sheep of the flock will be scattered."
But after I am raised up, I will go ahead of you to Galilee.' Amen. *(NRSV)*

Today's hymns

One more step along the world I go (CH:530)
Spirit of God, unseen as the wind (CH:600)
Praise to the holiest in the height (CH:378)
To the name of our salvation (CH:471)

The Bible often flows in a slow and steady kind of a way, yet occasionally it will go into overdrive, accelerating to top speed in no time at all. On those occasions when its velocity threatens to outpace us entirely, it can be good to home in on a key passage – a little snippet – which might contain a thought, an idea, a moment for us to look at and hopefully take to heart.

Today's Bible passage well and truly falls into that category, because it comes from the hectic period of Holy Week (which takes us into the drama of the period from Palm Sunday through to Good Friday). Furthermore, our reading homes in on Maundy Thursday, that day on which the Jesus story is arguably at its most intense. Trouble is brewing all around, with the sound of tragedy gathering up into a huge crescendo of heartache. Jesus brings his friends together for one final meal and he tells them all of the agonising journey which will be his. He can see before him his arrest and trial followed by execution, in which his body will be broken and his blood poured out. But among all his final words of guidance and command, Jesus makes a point of saying something crucial, and saying it with great simplicity:

"... after I am raised up, I will go ahead of you to Galilee."

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Let's move to the present day: right now, all over the country (indeed, right around the northern hemisphere) there are 18-year-olds who are settling into a new way of life. First came the exam results in August with their good news … or perhaps not-so-good news. Next came the countless September trips to Ikea and Asda and goodness-knows-how-many other shops, to stock up on bedding, kitchen utensils, new socks and perhaps even one or two introductory textbooks.

With fond farewells to family (especially pets) this army of young people embraced adventure with both hands as the sunny days of early autumn lured them out of residence rooms and into the streets and parks and pubs and clubs of their wondrous new term-time homes. There would be the excitement of new friends, new interests and new studies, all lined up ahead of them.

But now – <u>right now</u> in mid-October – comes the "crunch moment" for many first years, when those sunny experiences give way to dreich and dismal days, with hard equations, dense theories and long reading lists which are daunting, to say the least. Some first years will take that crunch moment in their stride, never looking over their shoulder. Others will feel like a leaden weight has been placed in the pit of their empty stomach.

("How is it that Mum makes her spaghetti carbonara? Mine tastes nothing like it.")

The story I have laid out here is one that suits this point in the calendar, though it is only one of many "transitional" stories across all of life, from starting playgroup in the joy of spring, all the way through to entering a care home in the depths of icy winter. And those leaden-weights in the pit of the stomach are in no way limited to anxious, overwhelmed teenagers. So whoever we might be, however young or however old, we will <u>all</u> face big transitions in life – transitions which will shape us in one way or another. And yes, we might find some of those points of transition to be very, very hard, just like an 18-year-old feeling so very lost in the big, bad city.

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What are we to make of such transitions? In Psalm 121, we come across these words:
The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in from this time on and forevermore.

Or put another way, God's protection is there for us – God's protection is our assurance, our confidence – here, there, now, for ever. And this divine assurance is something we can examine from a range of different angles. God is there in all our comings and go-ings but, equally powerfully, those most taxing moments of change may come to us at points when we have become "cracked" by life's pressures: as though God is able to identify those cracks in our tough exteriors and find a merciful "way in" to our troubled souls. When we are no longer struggling to be strong, then our weakness – even our "ground-down-ness" – can give God a way in.

As we think of our reading from Matthew's gospel, we are met with a Jesus who is in crisis mode. His time in the city of Jerusalem has been one of opposition, with enemies all around, each looking for the best and most efficient way of having him put to death. Time is short and getting shorter, and Jesus has a very good idea of how things are looking, not just for himself but also for his disciples. And so he gives them all a clear and unmistakable guide to what will happen next, culminating in these words:
'You will all become deserters because of me this night; for it is written,
"I will strike the shepherd,
and the sheep of the flock will be scattered."
But after I am raised up, I will go ahead of you to Galilee.' *[Emphasis added.]*

*You s*oon-to-be-scattered flock, says Jesus, will not be alone, because I am the one who goes ahead of you, who will be there to meet you and greet you - yes, even when you have sunk so far down that you feel certain you could not sink any lower. I will go ahead of you.

This assurance may well have been lost on the disciples at the time. They found themselves confused by the astonishing turn of events all around them at that point of farewell. Yet, as we look ahead in the gospel of Matthew, we find that they did find Jesus again: he had indeed gone ahead of them, first to meet them and then to send them off … and out … and away with these great words of commission:
'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.'

How this message must have resounded in their ears: "… remember, I am with you always …". These are the words which changed everything for the friends of Jesus in the first century. In the same way, they change everything for his friends today.

Let's end with the words of the great theological writer, Tony Robinson, who takes us back to those words of Jesus, the one who tells his friends that he will be waiting for them once they have been cracked and crazed by life: "Ours is a God who knows the journey, who is on the move, who goes ahead of us to Galilee. You will be upheld. You will be sustained, in your going out and coming in, by the mercies of God. Trust this. "

Let us pray:

A prayer of Tony Robinson: Bless, O God, by your powerful presence our going out and coming in, our dying and our rising, in the name of the risen One, who has gone before us. Amen.

Praying for others

The last few days have seen the first anniversary of the 7th October atrocities which threw the Middle East into a downward spiral of conflict.
The Moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland,
the Rt Rev Dr Shaw Paterson, offers these words of prayer at this tragic time:

Almighty God,
help us to turn the word "peace" into a verb,
that we become active in seeking opportunities for dialogue and
meaningful discussion as a means to identify
a path to peace for all people in Israel and Gaza.

We pray for an end to the war on Gaza and
for a just resolution for all the people of Israel and Palestine.
We condemn all acts of violence and atrocities,
and pray that every individual
may live free from the horrors still being endured.

May this anniversary be an opportunity to step back from
further escalation as we see it unfolding in the Middle East,
and may we work together for peace and justice for all.

We remember all those who endure continued trauma and distress,
those suffering physical and emotional injury and
those who have been bereaved.
Give to them your comfort and enable them to know
that they are surrounded by your love.

In the Name of Jesus Christ, we pray. Amen.

Weekly Updates ...

Christian Aid: The team would like to thank everyone who supported or helped at last weekend's art exhibition. Over £1,300 was raised to support the work of CrossReach and Christian Aid.

Bible Study: Our autumn groups (in-person and via Zoom) are now under way, as we spend six weeks looking at Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians. It is not too late to join one of the groups. Abigail has details.

Gladsmuir Coffee and Craft Group: Fortnightly on a Wednesday from 10-11.30am in Gladsmuir Church. Come along on 16nd October for the next friendly gathering. All welcome!

New Age Kurling: Tuesdays from 2-4pm in Room 3, Longniddry Church.

Wednesday Club: From 2.30-4pm in Room 2, Longniddry Church. Come along and enjoy a variety of activities and tea/coffee. (Contact Janet: 07766 574123).

Sporting Memories Group: Thursdays from10.30am – 12 noon in Room 3, Longniddry Church.

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