

THE SUNDAY FOCUS

Weekly Worship from Gladsmuir & Longniddry Parish Churches

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Online at www.longniddrychurch.org.uk

Today's Bible reading

Philippians 1:3-11 ("Paul's Prayer for the Philippians")

I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now. I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ. It is right for me to think this way about all of you, because you hold me in your heart, for all of you share in God's grace with me, both in my imprisonment and in the defence and confirmation of the gospel. For God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the compassion of Christ Jesus. And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best, so that on the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God. Amen. (NRSV)

James 3:13-18 ("Two Kinds of Wisdom")

Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom. But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth. Such wisdom does not come down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish. For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind. But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace.

Today's hymns

Come, let us to the Lord our God (CH:482)

Christ is coming (CH:475)

I heard the voice of Jesus say (CH:540)

Thine be the glory (CH:419)

Colonel Crichton was a veteran of military intelligence from the Second World War, who had retired in the mid-1970s for a quiet life in the countryside. Less of a thinker and more of a doer, this bundle of energy could be seen whirling around the West Sussex village of Merlington like a seasonal tornado. Four times a year the Colonel would direct her village productions – and direct them from the front – starting with the children’s Easter bonnet parade, before moving on to the village summer fayre, then the church harvest festival. But the greatest triumph of them all came each December when she took command of a festive extravaganza.

“Right then everyone, this is our first rehearsal for the Merlington pantomime, 1979. Gather round, gather round! We have but *nine weeks* in which to build this production from the ground up. Do ... I ... make myself ... *clear?*”

No-one knew for sure whether or not the Colonel really *could* kill the enemy with her bare hands. What they were certain of was that no-one wanted to find out.

After many fraught nights in the hall, somehow the evening of the dress rehearsal finally rolled around. This promised to be a *Puss in Boots* to remember, the title role being played by Audrey Danvers, a gifted 17-year-old who had just won a place at drama school in London. Perfectly feline in movement and subtle in her range of half-masked glances, Audrey had what Colonel Crichton called stage presence. As a result, the keen and committed teenager was surely destined to enjoy four nights of stardom which would live long in the memory of Merlington’s theatrical circle.

Less happy, however, was the state of the children’s choir, a troupe of five reluctant singers, press-ganged into wearing 19th century costumes and ill-fitting wigs. With 24 hours until the opening night, the unwilling quintet had dwindled to a single volunteer in the person of Colin Potts, Audrey’s 12-year-old cousin.

“What’s all this?” yelled an incredulous Colonel Crichton. “Our party scene needs a choir with *five* children, but *four* of them appear to have gone AWOL.”

“Please Ma’am,” answered young Colin with admirable poise, “Ted Williams fell on the ice and broke his ankle. Julie Roberts got took to the infirmary with a nasty dose of something or other. My sister Jacqueline says she’s had ‘enough of that woman’s bellowing’ (her words, Ma’am, not mine). Oh, and little Billy Davis from down Church Lane has went and lost his voice, which ain’t coming back any time soon, so says Dr Gladby. Apologies for their absence, Ma’am!”

Colonel Crichton snorted violently as she shook her head in ill-concealed anguish.

“Disa-a-aster!” she howled. “An absolute disa-a-aster! What a calamitous concatenation of catastrophes, eh Master Potts?”

“So it would appear, Ma’am. Them are the woja-ma-call-its wot are sent to try us.”

“They are indeed. And such a daunting trial it is proving to be. Just what *are* we to do?” At that moment a costumed cat sidled up to the pair with a suggestion.

“If you’re interested, Colonel Crichton, I think I might have a way ...”

“Ah, Miss Danvers!” yelled the director. “I *love* a contingency plan. Go on girl!”

“Picture the scene: it is Christmas Eve in the drawing room. The guests arrive, each looking forward to a special night of yuletide entertainment. But the snow has fallen in the mountains and the choir can’t get through. Everyone feels sad until one small boy steps forward to offer some Christmas verse.”

“Ooh yes!” chimed in Colin. “Posh folks all love a good festive pome.”

“A good *what*, boy?”

"Festive pome, Ma'am; a proper seasonal one for all them guests to listen to and think about and suchlike. With snow ... and maybe an unexpected death or two."

"And you have such a pome? I mean ... poem?"

"Cousin Audrey has one, Ma'am. Wrote it herself for our high school Christmas pome competition, she did. And a right cracker it is too ... even without any deaths."

At this, Colonel Crichton beamed broadly. "Initiative! One must admire a good dollop of initiative in another's hour of need. What say you, Audrey?"

"Well Colonel, I think we might just be able to pull this one off. Why don't I write out my poem for Colin to recite? After all, he's got a full 24 hours to learn it."

"That really would be something," said Colin. "Imagine ... *me* ... a reciterist." "You soon will be, young man. To a quiet corner, both of you. And step lightly about it."

Some 20 minutes later, Audrey led Colin back on stage, ready for his trial by ordeal, a single sheet of paper clasped safely between his trembling hands. Steadying himself as he looked out across the dark to his invisible audience, Colin straightened his back, took a deep breath, and embarked upon his big cousin's Christmas pome:

*Out of the sky an angel bold brought shepherds, watching o'er their fold,
Good News to darkened fields so cold – all of a winter's night.*

*The herald said, "Be of good cheer, cast off your doubt and lose your fear.
The Lord of heav'n is drawing near," – all of a winter's night.*

*Those shepherds ran with willing feet to Bethlehem, a babe to greet,
and there the Prince of Peace did meet – all of a winter's night.*

*Out went those shepherds far and wide to where the townsfolk did abide,
and shared the news of Christmastide – all of a winter's night.*

*Now mark it well, that manger bare which cradles God's dear Son so fair,
this Child who saves us from despair – all of a winter's night.*

*Our tale is told – now may you know, as did those shepherds long ago:
Christ's birth – today! – sets hearts aglow – all of a winter's night!*

As cast and crew clapped and stamped their approval, Audrey turned to the director: "That's what we've got, Colonel. You're welcome to it, if it's any use to you for the party scene."

"Any use to me? ... *Don't be absurd, child!* ... You and young Colin are bringers of peace at a time of unspeakable tumult – a Christmas God-send, and nothing less! I shouldn't wonder if the pair of you aren't about to steal the show. Not a dry eye in the house! Standing ovation! Roses strewn about your merry way! And ... if I might make so bold ... '*all of a most felicitous winter's night.*'"

And so it turned out – all except that bit about the roses because, as the green-fingered Colonel would tell you herself, flowers are not ten-a-penny in Merlington's Decembers – even for performances of such an amazing calibre. The audiences over those four sell-out nights (plus the Saturday matinee) all agreed: it had been that fierce but fabulous director's finest hour.

And at each performance the most touching moment came at the curtain call when cousins Audrey the poet and Colin the reciterist walked on stage hand in hand, to take their bows under a wave of rapturous applause. The Merlington pantomime had been something of a Christmas miracle.

Ask any cat and it would tell you: the show was just ... *pur-r-r-fect.*

Pause for Pondering

Throughout Advent and into Christmas *The Sunday Focus* will be offering four questions relating to the Bible readings and story-sermons for the day. Today we focus on the texts from the letters to the Philippians and to James, alongside the story of how young Colin and his big cousin Audrey saved the pantomime:

1. The Colonel is a daunting figure whose commanding presence undeniably gets things done. Do you respond well or badly to this kind of leadership?
2. In James chapter 3 we read of a harvest of righteousness for peacemakers. Faced with a looming crisis, two young cousins find an excellent solution to a big problem. What attributes did they bring to the task of peace-making?
3. Philippians 1:7 speaks of “partners in God’s grace”. In what ways might God use the simple yet heartfelt Christmas creation of Audrey the poet?
4. At Christmas, how might congregations share their faith and so bring something of heaven to the festivities which take place across a community?

Weekly Updates ...

Gladsmuir Christmas Coffee Morning: at Gladsmuir on Saturday 14th December from 10.30am – 12.30pm. Enjoy Christmas music with your coffee. Cake and candy stall, gift items, lucky dip for the children, and more! Entry by donation covering refreshments. Proceeds to help those facing hardship at Christmas.

Christmas Sing-along: Everyone is very warmly invited to a festive gathering organised by Longniddry Parish Church on Sunday 15th December, at 3.30pm. Our “Christmas Sing-along” event will bring together best-loved Christmas hymns, seasonal folk songs, jazzy festive numbers and more, with the emphasis on the members of seven local congregations praising God together as Christmas approaches. Come along to Longniddry Church and wrap yourself in the joy of the season as we worship God together with friends from our neighbouring congregations. Special guests, Christmas cheer, fun and laughter await (not forgetting refreshments). It’s free of charge ... and all welcome ... so bring a friend!

Christmas help: East Lothian Council and the Pennypit Trust are working hard to ensure that people in our county are able to enjoy a brighter Christmas, through the provision of plated meals and “jingle bags” at Christmas. If you would like to help, you are encouraged to make a financial donation or to bring to church a box of chocolates or chocolate biscuits. More details from Robin, Frances or Douglas.

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 from 10.30am – 12 noon in Room 3, Longniddry Church.