THE SUNDAY FOCUS

Weekly Worship from Gladsmuir & Longniddry Parish Churches
Issue 249 29th December 2024
Online at www.longniddrychurch.org.uk

Today's Bible reading

Colossians 3:12-17 ("The New Life in Christ")

As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. Amen. *(NRSV)*

1 John 4:7-21 ("God is Love")

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.

By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. And we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Saviour of the world. God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God. So we have known and believe the love that God has for us.

God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. Amen. *(NRSV)*

Today's hymns

See him lying on a bed of straw (CH:310)
Bethlehem, a noble city (CH:325)
The first nowell (CH:323)

To be feared? Or to be welcomed? One never can tell. A big freeze rarely comes to our village in the Duchy of Brabant, yet in those harsh Flemish winters when the ice chooses to form so very thick and fast, everyone knows there will be adventure a-plenty before the coming of the thaw.

The winter drama transforms our community in more ways than one. There is the cold that seeps through goose-pimpled flesh, cutting to the marrow and robbing many a poor beggar of his life in a single night. And yet, this is also a time for young and old alike to make sport, as revelry and laughter find their home upon the ice.

As news of "a proper freeze" spreads far and wide, a grand parade of humanity will skate and slide its merry way in jovial harmony upon the slippery whiteness. With rudely hewn sticks they come to send their wooden pucks sliding faster than the eye can follow. Others will haul their curling stones out as far as they dare, anxiously seeking out a solid grounding for their swaddled feet. Some will make holes for their baited hooks. For most though, there will simply be the rare glory of the skating season, with athletes vying for honours, whether in speed or endurance.

In short order the word of the freeze will spread to traders and hawkers, fortune-tellers and gin-sellers, each making his or her way with stall or booth to this river of business opportunity. And those of more restrained respectability, such as myself? We would do well to keep our distance, looking on from the safety of a hillock, happy that our reputations should remain as clean as our breeches.

It was there upon the Feast of Stephen that I spied him among the gathered crowd of spectators – a strange figure whose robes spoke of priesthood in a large city church ... Antwerp maybe? Our eyes meeting, I ventured an unbidden introduction.

"Your Reverence, the Lord be with you this St Stephen's Day!"

He looked at me with an air of humility. "A Merry Christmas to you too, kind Sir! I am Dr Jan de Witt, sent by my archbishop to oversee hardship relief across the farms and villages of Brabant this bleak winter. I am at your service!"

"Auguust Peeters," said I, "attorney and member of the local consistory court. My line is the law, while yours is theology – an academic pursuit that is most worthy."

My new friend smiled: "In truth, both your law and my theology will only find their purpose when lived out in the challenges of a cold world such as this."

I found myself strangely drawn to this enigmatic character, so I extended an invitation: "My manor house is but a stone's throw from this mound. A fine Burgundy awaits, to warm you by a roaring fire."

"Right civil of you, sir!" came his swift rejoinder. And so saying, he tossed a coin – *a silver coin*, if you please – into the out-held cap of some destitute wastrel crouched low upon the hilltop, barely an arm's length from where we were standing.

"Mightily generous of you,' I commented, "if I might make so bold. Yet that wretch will surely squander your well-intentioned gift upon liquor."

"Aye," said he with mischief. "Perhaps he will throw it all away on fine Burgundy."

His rebuke made me smile, though now he spoke with resolve: "A coin such as the one our brother now possesses can carry with it much grace. And grace is quite the enigma, for it is a gift which would cling to each and every soul. Yet grace must also be handed on and shared out if it is to enrich, whether the giver or the receiver."

He had me there. "Well sir, let me admit that in a courtroom my concern is more for discipline and order than ever it is for this 'grace' of which you speak. Keep the

streets safe from vagabonds and pickpockets and society will prosper. That is my considered view, though it may well differ from your own."

We looked out in silence on the jollity before us until he turned to face me, and posed a yet more taxing question: "These 'vagabonds and pickpockets' of your jurisdiction ... would God, the chief magistrate of all, label them thus? Or would he call them by more familiar names? Why, most certainly he would! In my mind grace and justice will rest upon settling this singular question: what is it that we are to attend to in our short span of life? Some might say that we are to beat down the many dangers which would rise up around us, threatening our safety. I do not see things thus. No: I choose rather to focus on those neighbours of ours with human needs and human failings, much as our own."

Now I found myself confused. I sought from him some clarification, which swiftly he gave: "We all have needs in life. Some need guidance, others, care. And oftentimes there will be need of a second chance (and a third ... and a fourth.) But beneath each of these necessities is a most profound need for grace – for God's grace. And in that universal fact the Child of Bethlehem comes to call each soul to be a fount of plenty in their own little corner. Take my elder brother, a physician motivated by the Gospel of Christ to bring light into the darkness of Antwerp's most deprived districts. Day in, day out, the man saves lives, seeking not a penny in recompense from his poorer patients. He could be rich in gold, but by dint of giving and giving and giving still more, he makes himself richer yet by far."

I was impressed by Dr de Witt's vision. "It strikes me forcibly," I ventured, "that you – and your brother also – are men of thankful disposition, where lesser mortals such as myself would recognise but grief and pain all around."

"And that, sir, lies at the core of the Bethlehem tale. Our eyes must be trained on the far horizon, intent on those glimpses of glory which make up Christmas. So may we be roused into a new and generous frame of mind. Yet *close* your eyes, your ears – aye, sir! – your very life, and you will blot out all possibility of seeing, of hearing, of sensing by any means true thankfulness for yourself. Only stay alert to some vision of God's great dream and shards of heaven will be yours to marvel at with eyes and ears ... and life ... each one wide open. Now, you mentioned a glass of Burgundy?"

We made our way with caution, edging down the muddy slope that leads toward my manor. Suddenly he stopped, turning to face the frozen river one last time.

"Look, sir," he pointed. "Truly open your eyes right now and tell me what you see."

"Well," said I in my startled state, " I see those imprisoned waters held firm within in the bonds of winter."

"Or," beamed he, "an entire company of souls liberated to the glory of carnival. A festival of joy made real in human happiness. Two views, then, of one single scene. We each choose our own way of apprehending what is before us. For you, there is a picture of winter's chill. For me, it will ever be a scene of unremitting warmth."

"Or to put it another way," I ventured, "for me, it is merely about the water, while for you, it revolves around those who would walk upon it."

"Good man," he laughed. "Good man! And so you grasp the miracle! May you find room in your life for the promptings of grace. For without that grace from heaven, how could we ever hope to usher warmth into frozen hearts? God's gift of grace, sir, is the pathway to life – true life in all its fulness!"

Pause for Pondering

1. Christmas is often thought of in terms of heavenly love, yet in what ways does *grace* come down at Christmas?
2. The Incarnation finds its meaning in love. In 1 John 4 we read that "God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him". This life in Christ can mean many things to many people, so what does it mean to you?
3. Colossians 3 gives the Church a sense of believers who "clothe" themselves in compassion. It goes on: "… whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus". Does the Church grasp this idea of a Christ-like public compassion which we are to put on like a garment, or are we more than a little nervous or sceptical, unwilling to reach out to those in trouble?
4. Jan de Witt and Auguust Peeters view the frozen scene before them in opposing ways, yet despite their differences they enjoy each other's company. How might we dare to embrace others whose views and beliefs might be at odds with our own?

Weekly Updates …

Mission Grouping: It was wonderful to have so many people gathering for our "Christmas Sing-along" on Sunday 15th December. The intention was to have representatives from Gladsmuir, Longniddry, Cockenzie & Port Seton, Prestongrange, Tranent, Ormiston and Pencaitland (and all did indeed participate!). Moving into 2025, these seven congregations will work closely together as we undertake mission planning within this corner of our Presbytery.

Christmas food donations: Longniddry's congregational treasurer, Douglas Clarke, has transferred £1,435 to the Pennypit Trust to assist with their vital work supporting families and individual's in need over the Christmas season. This represents the total amount collected over recent weeks for Christmas food provision, not least the purchasing of steak pies which might not otherwise have been possible. This support is really meaningful, as seen in this response from Jonathan Sharples, office manager at the Pennypit Trust:
"Thank you so much for these funds. This funding will support families and socially isolated [individuals who] are in the most need this festive period. … On behalf of everyone at the Pennypit Trust we really appreciate this donation."

Visit from Father Mark: On Sunday 19th January we will be delighted to welcome Father Mark Elliott Smith back to our congregations. He will be coming all the way from London to join us from the Church of Our Lady of the Assumption and St Gregory, Piccadilly, as we celebrate together the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. His grandfather was the Rev William Wiseman, Gladsmuir's minister from 1914-50 and the person who exactly 100 years ago was working so hard towards the establishment of a church in Longniddry.
Father Mark was last here two years ago, and in January 2024 Robin and Ailsa made a reciprocal visit to Piccadilly. It is very good to know that our friend will be joining us at both 9.45am (Longniddry) and 11am (Gladsmuir) as together we worship God and consider our unity in Christ.

Printed and published by Gladsmuir Parish Church (Church of Scotland): SC005996; and Longniddry Parish Church (Church of Scotland): SC016556.