THE SUNDAY FOCUS

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

John 1:29-42 ("The Lamb of God")

The next day he saw Jesus coming towards him and declared, 'Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! This is he of whom I said, "After me comes a man who ranks ahead of me because he was before me." I myself did not know him; but I came baptising with water for this reason, that he might be revealed to Israel.' And John testified, 'I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptise with water said to me, "He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptises with the Holy Spirit." And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God.'

The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples, and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, 'Look, here is the Lamb of God!' The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, 'What are you looking for?' They said to him, 'Rabbi' (which translated means Teacher), 'where are you staying?' He said to them, 'Come and see.' They came and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day. It was about four o'clock in the afternoon. One of the two who heard John speak and followed him was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother. He first found his brother Simon and said to him, 'We have found the Messiah' (which is translated Anointed). He brought Simon to Jesus, who looked at him and said, 'You are Simon son of John. You are to be called Cephas' (which is translated Peter). Amen. *(NRSV)*

Today's hymns

Holy, holy, holy (CH111)
God is love, his the care (CH193)
Longniddry: *Ye gates* (CH19)
Gladsmuir: *The earth belongs to God alone* (CH18)
Sing to the Lord a joyful song (CH184)

This sermon was preached by Robin in the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, 2009.

In our baptismal services we use a word which often raises a few eyebrows, and which sometimes even causes shock in a Scottish, Presbyterian church. That word is the word "Catholic". At both Gladsmuir Church and Longniddry Church here is the all-important phrase which is used: "You who are gathered here represent the whole Church, what we call the Church Catholic or the Church Universal."

"Hold on a minute," you might think, with a very visible frown on your face, "isn't the Church of Scotland supposed to be Presbyterian?"

And to that question, the answer is yes … sort of. Yes, because the Church of Scotland is part of what we call the Presbyterian Church, but we are also part of something much, much bigger than that. The Church of Scotland – that Church of Scotland into which so many people have been baptised across the centuries – is part of the Church of Jesus Christ throughout all the world (and that's all the world). This could be called the *universal* Church, but the other name for it is the *Catholic* Church. "Catholic" simply means "general", so we are talking about a Church "embracing the whole body of Christians everywhere".

For us to be part of what we identify as "the Catholic Church" obviously means that others will be part of that Church too: this would include Anglicans, and Methodists, Orthodox and – yes, of course – *Roman* Catholics. Every one of these denominations will be different in a variety of ways, yet all will be bound up together in our love of God and in our over-riding belief that Jesus Christ is Lord.

That, of course, sounds neat and tidy, as though Christians of every type enjoy nothing better than getting together for a big love-in. However … the reality of Church history and the pain of today's sectarian Scotland should make us think again. While many people around the world can respect our beliefs surrounding Jesus Christ, some folk will say that when they look at the Church what they invariably see is a terrible division rather than the love which Christians say they have for one another. And insofar as that hatred is indeed to be found in the Church (whenever it is present in our congregations and through our courts) we owe it to Christ be be honest and up-front: Christian division is an obscenity within the Body of Christ.

Today we are marking the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity: a point in the calendar when the Church through all the world – the truly Catholic Church – takes time to stop, and to think and to pray for the togetherness we so often fail to value. And when we pray in this week, what we are asking God to do is to help us be the worldwide Church which God yearns for us to be, a Church which is genuinely united in the love of God.

In our reading today, we meet once again John the Baptist, this time shortly after he has baptised Jesus in the River Jordan. This event had a marked effect on Jesus, opening his eyes to God's remarkable presence in his life. But for John also, this was a life changing moment. John was able to discern what was truly important, recognising the amazing work of God in and through that moment when Christ emerged from the waters. He was able to focus on what really mattered.

"There," said John, "*there*, is the Lamb of God." He saw in his second cousin Jesus something that he might never have publicly acknowledged before – the actual manifestation of God in Jesus: pervading his person. God, as we say, in sandals.

You see, at that moment of revelation for John, I don't think he was concerned about things like how many candles you should have on your Communion Table, or whether the church building should be carpeted in red or in blue, or whether the tea rota should be placed inside or outside the kitchen. These, bizarrely, are all concerns that can cause conflict within a congregation, though could John care less about any of that stuff? Surely not, because John had spotted what was important and he knew what he should be saying: "There," said John, "*there*, is the Lamb of God."

When John encountered God at work in Jesus, that was all that mattered to him. With a real sense of urgency, he was bold to declare: now I know.

Move forward 2000 years, and what you find in today's Church is a worldwide fellowship of Christians, whose lives are dedicated to Jesus – countless millions of individual women and men and children who are doing their best, parish by parish, city by city, spread all around the world. But when you move away from the individual Christians, and through the slightly more contentious parish level, to the really rather tricky denominational "top flight" of the institutional Church, things can turn ugly. Our Church leaders get hung up on all sorts of issues from women ministers to gay bishops, from biblical interpretation to doctrinal detail.

I would like to suggest that we – you and I – should do our best as followers of Jesus, quite simply to take people as we find them, without labelling them or pigeon-holing them or seeing them as wrong just because they're different. God knows our various variations, and I feel sure that God knows them far better than we do. But God also meets us where we are. <u>And still God loves us.</u>

If that's the case, then we should get to know one another and in time get to love one another, whatever kind of Christians we might be. Looking for likeness rather than hunting down differences – I suggest <u>that</u> has to be a good way to live. But our reading gives us another big clue as to what we should aim for in terms of unity. Not only does <u>John</u> teach us how to focus on the important things, but <u>Jesus</u> leads by example in demonstrating how important our relationships truly are.

The second half of the reading shows us Jesus meeting two of John's disciples. John tells them that this man is the Lamb of God, and so they follow him (literally, they follow him as he is walking). Jesus invites the pair back to his house, and <u>he spends time with them</u>. He gets to know them, and he allows them to get to know him too. And so in Jesus we find someone who gets close to those he encounters in life.

Do you know that today in some cities, some towns, some island communities, there will be congregations of every available denomination in the area choosing to meet for worship in the most spacious church building they can find. They will pray together, they will hear a sermon preached by a worship leader who might be Episcopalian or Presbyterian, or Roman Catholic, or whatever. And they will sing their hearts out, accompanied by a band drawn together from each of these different parts of the Body of Christ. These Christian musicians will be making a joyful noise to the Lord, all … together, and altogether.

Where this kind of thing takes place, whether north or south or east or west, will this just be mindless tokenism? Can a "one-week-in-every-52" attempt at unity count for anything real and meaningful? Or dare we dream? Dare we dream that this kind of action is an attempt – a really sincere attempt – to recognise that we are all part of something big: bigger than our human organising could ever achieve on its own. Something so big, indeed, that it has at the very heart of it the One whom John called "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world". Amen.

Praying for others

Let us pray:

O Lord,
we come to you now recalling your Church across the world.

Help us in our daily living to value diversity, to honour differences, and to seek new understanding between one person and another, the whole world over.

Open our eyes to see the needs of those who are unknown to us, yet loved by you.

Open our ears to hear their cries, and respond with a Christ-like love.

And open our hearts so that our neighbours will no longer be in need.

Let us never be afraid to defend the weak who suffer under the anger of the strong; use us, according to your grace, to bring life to fruition in justice and reconciliation.

O God, heal us from exploitative ways which condemn other people to poverty.

Heal us from greed which makes trade unfair for those who are in greatest need.

Heal us from religious conflict which spreads mistrust from person to person.

Cause us to rise from fear and hopelessness into your resurrection hope.

Transform us through the joy of your Spirit, we pray.

This we ask in the Name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Weekly Updates ...

Visit from Father Mark: Today we warmly welcome Father Mark Elliott Smith who 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 a 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.

Special January concert: In the cold and dark of wintertime it's great to know that we will be having a visit from a musical friend. Bruce Davies will be performing a concert in Longniddry Parish Church on Friday 24th January , getting under way at 7pm. This is part of his farewell tour so - very sadly - it will be our last opportunity to listen to his beautiful and playing fin our sanctuary. Admission is by donation, with seasonal refreshments served. Come along and bring a friend!

Fancy a cuppa? A reminder that our next "Coffee Catch-up" for members of Gladsmuir and members of Longniddry will take place at Starbucks near the top of the Coal Road on Friday 31st January at 10am.

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