

THE SUNDAY FOCUS

Weekly Worship from Gladsmuir & Longniddry Parish Churches

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Today's Bible reading

Luke 24:44-53 ("The Ascension of Jesus")

He said to them, "This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms."

Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. He told them, "This is what is written: The Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high."

When he had led them out to the vicinity of Bethany, he lifted up his hands and blessed them. While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven. Then they worshipped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy. And they stayed continually at the temple, praising God. Amen. (NRSV)

Today's hymns

Lift up your hearts, believers (CH446)

For your generous providing (CH655)

Alleluia, sing to Jesus! (CH445)

When we think about the Ascension of Jesus from this earthly realm to the heights of heaven, it can be hard for us to visualise what might have taken place there in Jerusalem. Now, you might have given this quite some thought, picturing in your mind's eye that moment when Jesus was taken back to his Father. Speaking personally, I haven't given it all that much consideration, apart from one day back in 2003. But more of that later.

A few weeks ago, just before Easter, I'm sure we were all very impressed by the wonderful artwork which kindly came our way from Longniddry Primary School's Primary 3. They had created, if you recall, the most wonderful tableaux (yes, with an "x") which took us on a journey from Palm Sunday through the overturning of the money-changers' tables, the Last Supper, Gethsemane, the Crucifixion, all the way to Easter Day. But then there was one further tableau (this time without an "x"). And this showed Jesus being drawn mystically upwards, free from the limitations of earth's gravitational field. And why not? After all, many equally serious artists as the P3s have done precisely the same thing over the centuries.

I prefer the approach taken by a Passion play which I had the pleasure of attending in the aforementioned 2003. It was set in a country estate near the banks of the River Forth and - if I recall it rightly - it involved a perambulating audience who by the end of a long and exhilarating day finally made it to the point of Christ's Ascension. This involved a short prayer spoken by Jesus himself in the form of a blessing, in which everyone (cast and audience alike) bowed their heads and closed their eyes. Then, with the "Amen" pronounced and our eyes wide open once more, we looked up to see the disciples doing the same, with no Risen Christ anywhere to be seen. In those words of blessing, he had gone, as if vanished away from sight and presence. Then there was a confused silence until, at last, the actor re-appeared from his place of concealment further up the slope, looking out from on high. His closing words, as I seem to remember from across what are now more than two decades, came from the very end of Matthew's gospel:

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go 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 I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.

A really well-thought-out culmination to a very imaginative production, which rounded the whole thing off to perfection.

What are we to make of the Ascension? I like the line taken by Canon Christopher Irvine. So, how does this imaginative theologian approach the return of Jesus to the heavenly realms? Through, of all things, a very familiar nursery rhyme from years gone by:

"Pussy cat, pussy cat, where have you been?
I've been up to London to visit the Queen.
Pussy cat, pussy cat, what did you there?
I frightened a little mouse under the chair!"

The pussy cat, says Irvine, sets out on a big adventure in the company of Her Majesty. Can you even begin to imagine through the mind of an enquiring cat the soft sofas, the saucers of cream, the strokes and tickles received from such a regal figure? What a privilege for that feline visitor to the palace. And yet we are told that, even with all those golden opportunities laid out in front of the moggy, still it was the old, familiar routines that caught the cat's eye. Instead of looking up at the paintings and the sculptures and those velvet curtains just waiting to be climbed,

this cat did exactly the same as it always had done before, looking down at the level of the skirting boards for a mouse to chase.

Here is what Christopher Irvine says next:

"Christians are invited at Ascensiontide to raise their sights above their daily preoccupations, to see the whole picture and then to regard everything else in its light. Ascensiontide, with its imagery of the glorified Christ seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven' ... summons Christians to raise their sights, to cast off the blinkers of prejudice, and to contemplate the final scene, the full picture of our human flesh borne and presented by Christ to the Father. As Lewis Carroll, who enchanted and intrigued his audience by his spinning of tales and word games, said: 'That's glory for you!'"

That's glory for you - the glory of the Incarnate Christ, made real for us in human flesh and bone, in death and Resurrection, now raised above the human realm to take his place with his heavenly Father.

And so to the parting message of Jesus to his followers. (And, for the avoidance of doubt, that certainly means folk those followers who had been with him for the long haul, journeying down from Galilee ... just as it equally certainly means followers across the generations, right down to those of today.) Here comes that parting message of Jesus, right on cue:

This is what is written: The Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things.

Needless to say, not one of us is a witness of the Jesus of Nazareth found 20 centuries ago, but as Christians of living faith we are indeed witnesses of the impact which the Risen Jesus has on our own living in the here and now. Alongside the teaching passed down through the pages of the Bible, we have another jewel of faith to be cherished and nurtured and passed on: our own experience of Christ in our own living, as we walk through life with Jesus so very near at hand to inspire and to strengthen and to console. Christ is not a historical figure. Christ is a living reality, for you, for me, for all.

Let's close with a story attributed to a great figure of the faith, George MacLeod, as retold for us by another wonderful voice of the modern Church, Ron Ferguson:

"There is a very old legend, and all legends that persist speak truth, concerning the return of the Lord Jesus Christ to heaven after his Ascension. It is said that the angel Gabriel met him at the gates of the city.

'Lord, this is a great salvation that thou hast wrought', said the angel.

But the Lord Jesus only said, 'Yes.'

What plans hast thou made for carrying on the work? How are all to know what thou hast done?' asked Gabriel.

'I left Peter and James and John and Martha and Mary to tell their friends ... their friends to tell their friends ... till all the world should know.'

'But Lord Jesus,' said Gabriel, 'suppose Peter is too busy with the nets, or Martha with the housework, or the friends they tell are too occupied, and forget to tell their friends—what then?'

The Lord Jesus did not answer at once; then he said in his quiet wonderful voice: 'I have not made any other plans. I am counting on them.'"

Amen.

Praying for others

Dear Lord our God, we pray for peace in the world.

Where there is war in this, our troubled world, may there come peace.

The peoples of the earth yearn for peace, and we most earnestly pray for peace.

We thank you for your generous providing which sustains us all our days.

You provide us with all the good things that we need and enjoy.

We pray that many other people throughout the world who are not provided for may come to share in the bounty which your created world provides.

Lord, as we come to the end of the season of Easter
we rejoice with the disciples as they saw Jesus.

If we have not seen him, as they did, still may we see him in our minds and hearts;
strengthen our belief and keep us always faithful.

We pray for all people who are lonely or sick or unloved.

Help us to be some part of your love which flows out for every single soul.

Bless our community and our families, and show us how to serve each other and
how we may serve you.

These and all our prayers we ask in the name of
our Lord and Master Jesus Christ. Amen.

Weekly Updates ...

"Say it with Flowers": With the centenary of Longniddry Parish Church's building falling this autumn, our celebrations get under way with a fabulous themed floral event in the building itself. Bring your friends on Saturday 31st May (10am to 4pm) and Sunday 1st June (2pm to 4pm) and enjoy the beautiful sanctuary adorned with flowers to give glimpses of the past 100 years of faith and service. Tea, coffee and home baking, with admission free, and all warmly invited.

Blindwells Plant Sale: This takes place this Sunday 1st June between 2pm and 3.30pm at the Blindwells Community Cabin. Why not come along and meet some of our new neighbours from along the road? Proceeds to Christian Aid.

June Communion services: The Sacrament of the Lord's Supper will be celebrated this Sunday at 9.45am and 6.30pm in Longniddry Church, in our lovely flower-themed sanctuary. Join us then!

"Sing at 6.30": Gladsmuir Church's third "big sing" service of the season takes place on Sunday 8th May at half past six. Everyone is warmly invited to join in an evening of Pentecost praise as we celebrate this special day. Our retiring offering will be for Christian Aid Scotland.

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.

Sporting Memories Group: Thursdays from 10.30am - 12 noon in Room 3, Longniddry Church.