

THE SUNDAY FOCUS

Weekly Worship from Gladsmuir & Longniddry Parish Churches

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Online at www.longniddrychurch.org.uk

Today's Bible reading

1 Samuel 8:10-22 ("Israel Demands a King")

So Samuel reported all the words of the Lord to the people who were asking him for a king. He said, 'These will be the ways of the king who will reign over you: he will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots and to be his horsemen, and to run before his chariots; and he will appoint for himself commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and some to plough his ground and to reap his harvest, and to make his implements of war and the equipment of his chariots. He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his courtiers. He will take one-tenth of your grain and of your vineyards and give it to his officers and his courtiers. He will take your male and female slaves, and the best of your cattle and donkeys, and put them to his work. He will take one-tenth of your flocks, and you shall be his slaves. And in that day you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves; but the Lord will not answer you in that day.'

But the people refused to listen to the voice of Samuel; they said, 'No! but we are determined to have a king over us, so that we also may be like other nations, and that our king may govern us and go out before us and fight our battles.' When Samuel had heard all the words of the people, he repeated them in the ears of the Lord. The Lord said to Samuel, 'Listen to their voice and set a king over them.' Samuel then said to the people of Israel, 'Each of you return home.' Amen. (NRSV)

Today's hymns

Sing to the Lord a joyful song (CH184)

Lord, you have come to the seashore (CH532)

You shall go out with joy (CH804)

While on holiday this summer I made a discovery. Actually, it was a very, very small discovery but it still made me shiver at the strange wonder of what I glimpsed before me, there in the centre of the buzzing metropolis that is Lamlash. Put simply, one day I found myself scanning the far horizon, asking the question: "Is that the Turnberry Hotel?". Once I had managed to confirm with knowledgeable neighbours that my suspicions were, in fact ... fact, a trip to the far south of Arran gave us a much better view. And by that stage, Trump (as in "Trump Turnberry") happened to be in residence within his luxury hotel whose website boasts that the its "legendary history, luxurious accommodations, and stunning natural surroundings make us the perfect destination for discerning travelers" (with one "L"). We, however, were clearly not "discerning travellers" (with two "L"s), as that day we chose to frequent Kilmory Beach, with not a soul in sight and not a care in the world. Trump had all the luxury, but we were overjoyed to have Kilmory.

Donald Trump, eh? We could see the place where the world's most powerful human being was situated at that very moment. Here was someone who is looked up to by his millions of adoring supporters, trusting that he would be strong, decisive, willing to lead from the front in his MAGA quest to "Make America Great Again".

This level of doting adoration makes me think about the way in which people sometimes seek to place their leaders on a pedestal of almost mythic proportions. And this tendency is nothing new, probably coming down to us through the pages of the Old Testament. There we find rulers of nations who are anointed to their noble calling – their anointing being a recognition of the favour they allegedly enjoy in the eyes of God. It is easy to see how such a policy came to develop into a doctrine: a piece of theological teaching which spoke eloquently of "the divine right of kings". Put this idea together with its close cousin, the hereditary principle, and you end up with divinely installed monarchs who keep producing an on-going supply of apprentices. But what are the benefits? ... And what the costs? In Queen Elizabeth we enjoyed the exceptional reign of the exceptional monarch, loved and respected beyond measure. But go back just one single generation to the Queen's uncle David (strangely - and I'm pleased to say briefly - known as Edward VIII) and we find an individual whose lifestyle was chaotic and whose political convictions were deeply disturbing, not least to the UK Government of the mid-1930s.

The message, then, is disconcertingly simple: when it comes to monarchy, we need to be careful what we wish for. And this very message, as it turns out, ties in so very neatly with today's Bible passage from the First Book of Samuel. Although the "Samuel" in question was a significant figure, his importance came from the fact that he was an authoritative judge, and also a recognised and respected prophet of God. But Samuel was not, in any sense, shape or form ... a king.

Samuel lived a long and well-documented life from the point of his calling as a young boy right the way through to his old age. And that is where our reading comes in. The locals were not happy, and the reason the locals were not happy was this: they had looked around them and they had seen with their own eyes other people of other nations, and these other nations were ruled over by kings - kings who had camels and jewels and peacocks and fountains. Oh, and crowns as well. Kings were big on crowns. Gold crowns, lined with purple velvet and encrusted with lovely stones like lapis lazuli which most people had never even seen. What they did know was that lapis lazuli was an amazing shade of blue and that it only came from mines in far off, exotic Afghanistan. So, in a nutshell, what the people wanted wasn't a boring old judge, but a king - a proper king with palaces and

processions and occasional public holidays. That's what other countries did. And that's what made them real kingdoms.

Now, Samuel was a wise man who - I can well imagine - probably understood pretty well the key issues surrounding both kings and kingdoms. The first thing to note was that kings can be really great at the pomp and ceremony stuff. A king might put on a fabulous show for his subjects because he had the wealth to make that kind of stuff possible. But the second thing that Samuel certainly understood was that kings can be tricky blighters. Listen to Samuel's line on kings:

He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his courtiers. He will take one-tenth of your grain and of your vineyards and give it to his officers and his courtiers. He will take your male and female slaves, and the best of your cattle and donkeys, and put them to his work. He will take one-tenth of your flocks, and you shall be his slaves. And in that day you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves; but the Lord will not answer you in that day.

Even thousands of years ago, warnings were firmly in order when it came to the big, difficult topic of leadership. Some kings could be wonderful. Others might be a wee bit lacklustre or predictably self-serving. In a few conspicuous and well-documented cases a king could show his true, tyrannical colours, doing terrible things to young and old, rich and poor alike. Yet the writer Rhidian Brook recognises "a different kind of leader" who after many generations of royal ups and downs came along as a very unusual king. Put simply, Jesus brought with him a message that was eye-catching and more than a little remarkable.

Other leaders might seek illicit support from well-connected cronies, promising policies that would supposedly guarantee a better - greater! - tomorrow. But not Jesus: quoting Isaiah, Jesus set out his manifesto early on, telling the people that what he was proclaiming would be "good news to the poor", with captives released, recovery of sight to the blind, and freedom for those oppressed. What was all this about? It was about, as he himself put it, "the year of the Lord's favour" - a time of "jubilee" celebration in which Good News would be good indeed. Jesus brought a new conviction that God is absolutely not about royal excess, but is absolutely about grace and giving and justice and love, all offered freely from heaven to earth.

Oh ... what it must be like to be an ostentatiously wealthy, power-soaked US President owning one of the world's finest hotels and most famous golf courses. Consider the glory - the opulence - that must rest on those broad presidential shoulders. But then investigate some names from the past, some famous, others less so: Ulysses S. Grant; Martin Van Buren; Millard Fillmore; Theodore Roosevelt; Herbert Hoover; Richard Nixon; Gerald Ford; Jimmy Carter; George H.W. Bush. What is shared by these UD Presidents from down across the generations? Each has been a serving US President who sooner or later found himself roundly rejected, whether by a once-loving electorate or by their impatient party or by "the system" itself. And since January 2021, Donald Trump himself should be added to that list. But wait! The very same can be said for UK Prime Ministers: Churchill, Attlee, Eden, Macmillan, Douglas-Home, Wilson, Heath, Callaghan, Thatcher, Major, Blair, Brown, Cameron, May, Johnson, Truss, Sunak. Each one had their season, before either being warmly encouraged or else rudely forced to hire the removal lorry.

Mr President: please feel free return to the pleasures of Trump Turnberry. You are welcome to revel in its delights, enmeshed - as you surely will be - by layer upon layer of stifling security. Meanwhile, I and many others will be equally welcome to wander in magnificent freedom upon the rolling sands of Kilmory Beach. Amen.

Praying for others

Faithful God,
you are our true King, yet so often we look elsewhere for security and direction.
In a world that prizes power and influence, keep us steadfast in trusting you.
We pray for all the nations of our world and for their leaders:
Grant them wisdom and integrity, and to those who are leading negotiations for real
and lasting peace grant strength, courage and compassion.
God of Justice,
we pray for Your Church—here and across the world—
that we may be shaped by the mind of Christ to stand for what is just and true.
Bless our ministers, elders, and members,
that in our life and service together we may show the world
what it means to receive Your grace and exemplify your love.
God of Mercy,
we remember those who suffer under unjust rulers,
those caught in the grip of corruption or conflict,
those whose voices are silenced.
We pray for peace in Ukraine, humanitarian aid that is so desperately needed to the
people of Gaza, and hope to all that are living in a state of desperation or
hopelessness.
Use us—our words, our hands, our choices—
to speak truth, to act justly,
and to love mercy in your Name.
Eternal King,
hear these prayers, spoken and unspoken,
and make us ready to serve you in all things. Amen.

Weekly Updates ...

Christian Aid Guitar Recital: A concert will take place on Saturday 23rd August at 7.30pm with the acclaimed classical guitarist, Ben Kearsley. Tickets are priced at £10 for adults and £5 for Under 18s, including interval refreshments. Tickets can be bought from any member of the Christian Aid team: Peter Helmn, Abigail Morrison, Ann Lewis, Andrew Dickenson, Blythe Peart, Sheena Munro and Robin Cuthbertson.

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

Wednesday Club: From 2.30-4pm in Room 3, 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.