

THE SUNDAY FOCUS

Weekly Worship from Gladsmuir & Longniddry Parish Churches

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Online at www.longniddrychurch.org.uk

Today's Bible readings

Luke 13:10-17 ("Jesus Heals a Crippled Woman")

Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the sabbath. And just then there appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight. When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, 'Woman, you are set free from your ailment.' When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God. But the leader of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had cured on the sabbath, kept saying to the crowd, 'There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the sabbath day.' But the Lord answered him and said, 'You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water? And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the sabbath day?' When he said this, all his opponents were put to shame; and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things that he was doing. Amen. (NRSV)

Psalms 71:1-6 ("Prayer for Lifelong Protection and Help")

In you, O Lord, I take refuge; let me never be put to shame.

In your righteousness deliver me and rescue me; incline your ear to me and save me.

Be to me a rock of refuge, a strong fortress, to save me, for you are my rock and my fortress.

Rescue me, O my God, from the hand of the wicked, from the grasp of the unjust and cruel. For you, O Lord, are my hope, my trust, O Lord, from my youth.

Upon you I have leaned from my birth; it was you who took me from my mother's womb. My praise is continually of you. Amen. (NRSV)

Today's hymns

O worship the King (CH127)

Praise my soul the King of Heaven (CH160)

O Jesus I have promised (CH644)

The biblical teaching of our faith places great emphasis on the wisdom of God ... the faithfulness of God ... the assurance of God in all the many twists and turns of life. This is seen from Genesis to Revelation as different writers from different periods of biblical history put pen to parchment in order to declare their praise for their Maker and Redeemer in whom they place their trust.

In terms of a sustained message of divine hope through good times and bad, the ancient Book of Psalms truly serves us well, outlining a wisdom which sees beyond short term, petty human cleverness to reveal a divine constancy, a confidence in which we can set our trust.

Listen to these words of Psalm 71:

*Rescue me, O my God, from the hand of the wicked, from the grasp of the unjust and cruel.
For you, O Lord, are my hope, my trust, O Lord, from my youth.
Upon you I have leaned from my birth; it was you who took me from my mother's womb.
My praise is continually of you.*

The writer of Psalm 71 is clear and resolute. Had it been you or me with pen in hand, we might have been a little less enthusiastic, perhaps choosing to pray something of this sort: "In you, O Lord, I might consider taking refuge, if I could be persuaded that you are likely to be the best option available to me in my hour of need. Let me give it some thought, comparing notes with other refuge-seekers ... and it could be that I get back to you in due course."

Would that be the kind of message to flow from the lips, or the pen, or the heart of the Psalmist? Certainly not. And why? Because this powerful writer presents us with powerful petitions to God – petitions which are phrased in language which is firm and clear. Language like this:

*In you, O Lord, I take refuge; let me never be put to shame.
In your righteousness deliver me and rescue me; incline your ear to me and save me.*

The reality of the situation is that we hear through this psalm (and so many other psalms) the voice of one who knows God ... and who knows that God can be approached in a direct way, with no messing about, no pussy-footing around the edges of a thorny issue. God is open to our prayers, in whatever form those prayers might take.

To get theological for a moment, if God is all-knowing, then God knows how we are feeling, and God knows the troubles which are ours. That being the case, this Psalm helps us to understand that we are free to speak our minds openly in the presence of God, holding nothing back from our Maker and Redeemer, whose power, whose grace, whose Love come to meet us in our need. All our need.

One of the Psalms which I turn to a lot is Psalm 139. You may know it, whether from worship in church or from devotional reading or for that matter from funeral services (where it can be a source of great reassurance and deep consolation). Within Psalm 139 we learn something about how this all-knowing God is perceived:

*O Lord, you have searched me and known me.
You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away.
You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways.
Even before a word is on my tongue, O Lord, you know it completely.
You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me.
Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain it.*

Reflect on that, if you will: "Even before a word is on my tongue, O Lord, you know it completely." Such a powerful source of hope in our troubles.

This deep knowledge and understanding is of the very nature of God, and is something we should always keep in the forefront of our minds. God knows us completely. And that means that God knows not only our character, our flaws, our concerns, but also our many and varied needs. God knows us ... completely.

As followers of Christ, we hold to the notion that in Jesus of Nazareth we find God in human form. This is often portrayed through a kind of theological shorthand when we say that Jesus is "the Son of God". Jesus, then, is "of God". He is "one with God". And in today's reading from Luke's gospel, we get a glimpse of the heavenly concern which Jesus has for earthly women and men. Here's what happens:

One sabbath day Jesus is teaching in the synagogue when he spots the arrival of a woman who has been dreadfully disabled for many, many years. We have no way of knowing what her ailment might have been, though the gospel writer Luke tells us that she, "was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight". Seeing this woman and recognising her terrible distress, Jesus heals her, there and then. But he doesn't say, "Woman, you are made well". No, he uses a quite different image, suggested by these words: "Woman, you are set free."

The woman was healed, but more: the woman was freed – and this was a cause for great celebration among the assembly of the faithful ... or so we might think. Yes, perhaps for some, though definitely not for others. Luke takes up the story:

But the leader of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had cured on the sabbath, kept saying to the crowd, 'There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the sabbath day.'

For the religious leader it was a case of: "Six days, fine; seventh day, no way." And what about us? We find ourselves looking in on this drama from a very great distance: a distance in geography, in time, in society, in healthcare, in religion. Our world is so very different from that of the woman in the synagogue and of her detractor – a man of power and influence. But can we draw some worthwhile lessons from what we meet in this story? Perhaps we should look at the responses made by Jesus to the tension witnessed in the synagogue on that sabbath day.

First of all, he yells out: "Hypocrites!" In other words, Jesus takes on not just a single leader who has aired his anger at the healing, but the synagogue as a whole. They have got things badly wrong, in misjudging the act of healing which was carried out in a spirit of love and grace. They have held to the idea that the day of rest should be just that: rest and worship and nothing more. OK, says Jesus, but look at your own way of living on the seventh day of the week. When the day of rest rolls around you untie your ox or your donkey and you take the animal to the trough or the river or the lakeside to give it the water it needs for basic survival. In doing this you are being properly observant of the needs of your livestock, yet you cannot extend the same concern to a woman in deep distress. If it's right to help cattle, it must surely be a firm requirement to be there for the pressing needs of a human being. Jesus is on the side of the woman. Jesus is passionate over divine compassion and has no time for dull legalism.

The story ends with the religious folk being put to shame, and the surrounding crowd rejoicing at the wonderful things being seen in the life of the highly unusual teacher from Nazareth. This act of healing which he carried out that day was surely a form of liberation from on high. And if everyone in the synagogue could grasp that message, then everyone could similarly be made free.

Even rule-bound leaders ... and maybe even us. Amen.

Praying for others

Lord God,
you know us completely, even our words before we speak.
Bless our words that they may bring succour and help.
Stay the tongues of all who would say cruel, untruthful or divisive things, and
help them love their neighbour as themselves.
We pray especially for the meetings where words may help to
bring an end to the war in Ukraine.
Bless those involved that a fair and lasting peace may be brokered.
When we favour rules or custom over the needs of others,
remind us of Jesus' disregard for laws that hinder love.
Lead us in our daily lives, and our lawmakers in their work,
to ensure that rules lift oppression not confirm it.
Bless those who challenge injustice and speak for the oppressed,
even at the cost of their freedom or lives.
We pray for everyone who strives to bring healing and thus freedom.
We pray for all medical workers who help bring physical and mental healing.
We pray for charities and their donors who strive to bring healing and freedom from
poverty. Engage all your followers in your path through healing to liberation.
Father, we ask for this in the name of our Risen Saviour, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Weekly Updates ...

Lammermuir Festival: One of Scotland's best-loved music festivals comes again to Gladsmuir Parish Church with "The Sounds and Songs of Auld Lang Syne" on Friday 5th September at 3pm. Featuring Mhairi Lawson (soprano), Lorna Anderson (soprano) and Jan Waterfield (harpsichord) tickets priced at £30, £24 and £18 can be obtained from www.lammermuirfestival.co.uk.

Interim moderatorship: Since 1st August Robin has been interim moderator of Musselburgh Northesk Parish Church where the congregation's minister, the Rev Hayley Cohen, is currently on maternity leave until the end of July 2026. This will mean Robin charing Northesk's kirk session, working with the office bearers and leading Sunday morning worship there every so often.

September Communion services: Our next Communion services will take place on Sunday 7th September at 9.45am (Longniddry), 11am (Gladsmuir) and 6.30pm (Longniddry). Join us then!

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.