THE SUNDAY FOCUS

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

Psalm 1 ("The Two Ways")

Happy are those
who do not follow the advice of the wicked,
or take the path that sinners tread,
or sit in the seat of scoffers;
but their delight is in the law of the Lord,
and on his law they meditate day and night.
They are like trees
planted by streams of water,
which yield their fruit in its season,
and their leaves do not wither.
In all that they do, they prosper.

The wicked are not so,
but are like chaff that the wind drives away.
Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment,
nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous;
for the LORD watches over the way of the righteous,
but the way of the wicked will perish. Amen. *(NRSV)*

Today's hymns

O come, O come Emmanuel (CH273)
Lo! he comes with clouds descending (CH477)
People look East (CH281)
All my hope on God is founded (CH192; tune i)

São Paolo, Brazil, 1939: *Headmistress Fernanda da Silva is visiting the city's Education Department to clarify the situation of Maria dos Santos, a brilliant former pupil rumoured to have been visited by an angel.*

The new Director of Education for São Paolo was proving a fine appointment. Here was a new broom who was determined to bring about the cleanest of sweeps. Within only a few months he had implemented progressive measures which previously would have been unimaginable. Under his enlightened leadership he had won a budget increase from the municipality while attracting sizeable match-funding from local businesses. He had initiated a root and branch review of corruption among his senior officials, with half of his deputies facing criminal charges and lesser offenders quietly "retiring". Best of all, the cause of the department's woes, the Director's predecessor, Bernardo Pereira, had now been relocated to a new post as Prisoner 85692, City Penitentiary, having been convicted of conspiracy to murder a young school leaver by the name of Maria dos Santos.

"Miss da Silva to see you, Director."

"Excellent – please show her in."

As the Director rose from his busy desk, the tall and elegant figure of Miss Fernanda da Silva glided through the doorway. Coffee was enjoyed, with friendly small-talk exchanged. Then the reason for the meeting was tackled head on.

"Miss da Silva, I think you realise why we are here. The case of young Maria dos Santos is a troubling one. We have intrigue, a disappearing pupil and – let's not forget – allegations of a visiting angel. But now that the Press has moved on to other scoops and Maria has been forgotten, I have to ask you this: what is her story?"

Miss da Silva nodded pensively: "Of course, Director. And if I may say, thank you for your open-mindedness. (In the past, some have been a good deal less understanding). And so to Maria: she did indeed receive a visit from, as you have noted, an angel. She then convinced me that her life was about to take a dramatic turn, requiring her to leave our school and move to the home of her elder cousin Elisabeta. In due course a baby boy was born, just as the angel had said, but there were those who feared the new arrival. The family, well aware of the mortal threat which faced them, made their escape into Paraguay. A risky move, yet it paid off. Now they are home, and home is where they shall stay … for the present at least."

The Director rested his elbows on the arms of his leather chair, fingertips pressed together. "As headmistress, you are satisfied that Maria is in … a good situation?"

"I am indeed. Maria is a person of amazing resilience and faith. The reality is that as a young student she already had the bearing of an adult three times her age. She brought such wisdom to our little school."

"Wisdom?" asked the Director. "In what sense?"

"If you will permit me one story: you will no doubt have heard of the school fire of October 1933? A terrible disaster at the time, yet it could have been so much worse. Maria saw the flames and rushed from classroom to classroom managing the evacuation like a senior staff member. As the teachers stood outside at a safe distance gathering the girls, I realised just what a sensitive and spiritual soul we had in this Maria. 'All will be well,' she told me, with an almost chilling confidence. 'Have no fear, Miss da Silva. God will provide.' … And God did."

The Director leant forward, smiling gently: "You were blessed to have Maria in your time of crisis, just as she was similarly blessed to have you in her moment of decision. What will happen to her now?"

Miss da Silva raised her eyes to the ceiling, recalling all that had happened: "Your question is a fair one. I cannot say, though I feel certain that anyone visited from heaven will have quite a future ahead of them. She and I will keep in close contact."

The meeting over, Miss da Silva walked into the fresh morning air, the sunshine warming her face. As she strolled down the fashionable boulevards of the city centre she allowed her memory to wander back to those happy days when Maria had been so much a living, breathing part of school life. Back then, the headmistress had worried for her protégé, not on account of any weakness on the student's part, but because of her unmistakable thirst for justice, able as she was to stand up and speak out for many a downtrodden soul of São Paolo. It was as though the darkness of doubt and muddle simply evaporated when Maria spoke truth to power. She was never dogmatic, never bombastic, always cherishing the truth as again and again she would cast light upon any shadowy, grubby, weary adult topic. It had been enough to amaze the most experienced of the school's faculty.

The girl's commitment to her chosen causes would always make her an enemy of oppression. And, if truth be told, Miss da Silva had become fearful of how the authorities might react to a dangerous young revolutionary in their midst. Thankfully, Bernardo Pereira's wicked plot to have Maria dispatched by the secret police had been thwarted, with that dreadful bully now safely behind bars, his target free to live her life. But, yes. What of the future? The teenager had dodged her bullet, but now she and her baby boy would each grow into adult life, knowing that the ways of truth and courage are rarely straight or smooth. Or, in any sense, safe.

Still, she remembered, there had been that momentous day when Maria's strange visitor had brought the girl her life-changing news. His announcement must have counted for something. Who could fail to be impressed by angelic tidings, after all. The road ahead would be rough – of that there could be no doubt. "Blessed is the one who does not walk in step with the wicked," mused Fernanda as she reached a familiar crossroads, "or stand in the way that sinners take."

That is precisely the point, thought Fernanda as she nodded to herself at the busy junction. Maria shall not fear being compromised or diverted from her heavenly task. She has been tested before, first at school in the face of its destruction, then when she might so easily have been gunned down in yet another anonymous State execution. When trouble looms Maria will know what to do. Yes, she will. And as for her baby boy, he will be raised in a family which knows what it means to walk in the light. Just like his mother, so too he will face threats and dangers, but surely there will be angels waiting for him, guiding, strengthening, leading him forward on a journey of challenge and pain. Only time … and God … would tell.

Rounding a corner into a dank little lane occupied by the same old canasta tables as ever before, this remarkable teacher of courage and faith saw ahead of her the familiar sight of a tiny *boteca*, a neon light flashing out its name: *The Blue Parrot*. Stooping slightly to enter the doorway, she peered through the smoky darkness to glance around the little tables as the radio blared out a popular folk song. At last, her eyes rested upon a corner alcove occupied by two of the bar's more unusual regulars: a bright-eyed young woman of no more than school age and a baby … safe and secure in his mother's arms.

Pause for Pondering

You might like to spend some time reflecting on today's story-sermon, with the help of the following questions:

1. The opening sentence of the Book of Psalms cautions against walking "in step with the wicked". How does Fernanda keep in step with goodness?
2. Have you ever found "the darkness of doubt and muddle" being overcome and, if so, did any sort of illumination replace it?
3. Maria has a staunch ally in her old headmistress. Why is Fernanda so determined to support the girl and her baby son?
4. Does this story offer any insights into how the person of faith might journey forward through life's trials?

Weekly Updates …

Warm Winter Bags Appeal: This is being organised in association with East Lothian Council's winter initiatives. Please feel free to donate any of the following to help an elderly person facing hardship at Christmas: a 2026 calendar or diary; a warm winter item such as gloves, a hat, a scarf; a box of mince pies or some chocolate; a packet of biscuits or shortbread; a small pack of teabags or a jar of coffee; and (new this year) a thermos cup, so those receiving their winter bag can make a hot drink of their choice and have it stay hotter for longer. If you are able to supply any of these we would be grateful. Closing date: Sunday 7th December. To make a financial gift, please see either Douglas Clarke (Longniddry) or Peter Strachan (Gladsmuir).

Community Art Group: Taking place on Thursdays from 2-4pm, in Room 2 of Longniddry Church. No artistic skills or experience are needed, and people of all abilities will be made very welcome. No charge. For further details contact Ann Hyde on 01875 710480.

Christmas Sing-along: Organised by our Blindwells Mission Cluster, this annual service of joyful festive praise comes to **Ormiston Parish Church**. Folk, Gospel/ Blues and traditional Christmas Carols led by a band. Come along (early to avoid disappointment!) on Sunday 14th December at 3.30pm. All very welcome.

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 from10.30am – 12 noon in Room 3, Longniddry Church.

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