THE SUNDAY FOCUS

Weekly Worship from Gladsmuir & Longniddry Parish Churches
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Online at www.longniddrychurch.org.uk

Today's Bible reading

Matthew 5:13-20 ("Salt and Light")

"You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything but is thrown out and trampled under foot.

"You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. People do not light a lamp and put it under the bushel basket; rather, they put it on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

"Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfil. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Amen. *(NRSV)*

Today's hymns

Ye servants of God (CH130)
The Lord's my Shepherd (CH14)
I need thee every hour (CH556)
Now thank we all our God (CH182)

There are two quite remarkable things about the words of Jesus in our Bible reading this morning. Firstly, he is telling his followers they are the light. And secondly, he is telling his followers they are the light. As you no doubt spotted, those two sentences were pretty much identical in their wording. The difference comes in the change of emphasis between the first sentence and the second. So let's look at each in turn.

Jesus' followers are the light. Now light, as we know, comes in all sorts of types and it arrives with us by all sorts of means. It can be bright or dim. It can be lively or gentle. It can be cheering or terrifying. It can even appear to be hot or cool. Light can come from that massive burning globe, the sun, or from any number of far-distant stars. It can be direct light (like an electric bulb) or muted light (with the addition of a lampshade around the bulb). And don't forget that some of the loveliest light of all is that which is reflected (as we see from the moon in all its glory on a cold, clear winter's night.)

Moreover, light is in huge supply, and also in great demand. The natural world is awash with it, and new ways of shedding light seem to appear with every passing year. Indeed, only last month I took advantage of a January offer to buy for our churches' an *aurora borealis* simulator. But don't worry, my invoice to the treasurer will only be for its £5 price tag in the sales. While I would never claim that a piece of cheap LED technology could rival the natural wonder of the northern lights, I do firmly believe that come next winter, the Longniddry tree-lighting celebration in church will be all the richer for that £5 investment. Come along and judge for yourself. (It's a free event, so I am prepared right now to offer you a full money-back guarantee if you end up disappointed.)

I think we can see that the topic of light is vibrant, energetic and, at risk of stating the obvious, illuminating … which makes it all the more remarkable that Jesus is found in Matthew's gospel telling his friends and followers that they should see their role in the new order of faith as "light". Not (let's just be clear) bearers of light, carriers of light, distributors of light … but light - the very light of the world.

Jesus, we should recall, knows just how hopeless his followers can be, but still he insists that they are nothing less than "the light of the world". Why might this be? I believe that Jesus is telling those around him that they have been transformed into a power, or an energy, or a luminosity which can and should be shed far and wide. He is saying that wherever they go, the people they meet will be lit up by their beams of faith. They are light and nothing less than light in human form, charged with the heavenly commission to share not only what they have but actually what they are. And while these specially selected "human light sources" seem to burn dimly and with great uncertainty at first, there is no denying their effectiveness over time. With first of all Easter and then Pentecost, the flame glows and the light is spread further and further afield until, in the words of that saintly hymn writer Ian Fraser, everything is changed from hatred into love, from despair into hope, through the power of these spreading, searing flames of fresh insight and commitment:

Thus God our spirits lifts
fresh daring to inspire;
as common folk get gifts
to change the world entire:
the tongues of flame at Pentecost
ran through the world like forest fire.

The writer claims that the action of the Holy Spirit should be viewed as though "fireworks in the night": a veritable torrent of light and an explosion of sound which surely could neither be mistaken nor ignored.

It seems that through God's Holy Spirit the body of early disciples - who, together, made up that "light of the world" - put fear and folly behind them and set about their heroic task of shining in the shadows, dispelling the darkness so that others might see God's love … and believe.

And so to our second emphasis: Jesus' followers are the light. It's amazing. It's incredible. It's beyond our understanding and far more than we could ever hope to take in that God should use ordinary, failing people to change the world. Yet this hopeless crew of the gospels moves from being unreliable at best and a dreadful liability at worst. In the Book of Acts, these once power-hungry men take on huge responsibility, and at last succeed in the power of God's Spirit. As noted by Morna Hooker, Professor of Divinity at the University of Cambridge, the friends of Jesus, "may find themselves caught up in the sufferings which are going to come … Certainly they will be involved in suffering as disciples. But they are not to be dismayed. What they must do is to preach the gospel …"

And in preaching that gospel, what is it that the friends of Jesus do? They share the light: the light which they have become. This is no mere artificial light, man-made and synthetic. This is the very light of God – that light of which Jesus himself spoke, when he told them: "You are the light of the world."

There is, I believe, an urgency in this whole topic of light and faith. As Christian believers, should we not seek to model ourselves on those disciples who took the Good News of Jesus and courageously radiated it outward first to the people of Jerusalem, then across the Middle East and Europe, and on to encompass the whole wide world? These were very ordinary people who came, in time, to own their faith, and who then named it … and lived it … and shared it wherever they went.

Yes, spreading the light presents a big challenge, yet it is not impossible - far from it. None of us is a Billy Graham, or a Mother Teresa, or a Martin Luther King, or a Rosa Parks, or a George MacLeod or a Jane Haining. But remember that what they did in the 20th century, we can do in the 21st. We really can, not in our own power, but trusting in God's grace to make us people of strong and living faith, as each one shines their light: a personal light worth shedding. As I remember reading some time ago, from the religious writer Kate Kennedy: "… perhaps we are called to put our specific candles on our specific lampstands. … We may be amazed at what God can do with our precious, unique light."

I once heard it said that the core, central, vital, inescapable message of Jesus is contained within these four words: "You are the light." If we take this seriously then it follows that everything else in Jesus' life and Jesus' teachings should be seen as pointing to these four words of challenge and of joy.

I am not saying that everyone in church has the same calling. What I am suggesting instead is that your calling may very well be to live out the Good News of Jesus in simple and easily understood ways: through your conversations and through your acts of deliberate, intentional Christian living. As we said last week in both Longniddry Church and Gladsmuir Church, with Lent now drawing very, very near, start out on your journey to Holy Week and the Cross of Christ by living out one act of faith each day. For in that way, you will be embodying the very Good News of Jesus … and so you will shed your light. Amen.

Praying for others

God of all the earth,
we remember this morning the people of Ukraine,
who are being mercilessly targeted during a harsh winter,
with many people desperately in need of heating and shelter.
We ask that their needs will be met and that the war will end soon with a just peace.

We ask that those in Gaza who need medical treatment for wounds and injuries
caused by war would not be impeded but
receive a quicker response than is currently in place.
May the flow of aid increase to meet the acute needs that exist.

Be with all those nearer to home for whom this winter is bringing huge challenges,
whether from the costs of the basic necessities of life or
from the effects of flooding or other traumatic events.
May your presence be felt by all in need,
especially through the compassion shown by people who care.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Weekly Updates …

"Hamilton" Lent Bible Study: Longniddry Church will be running a Lent study course on Monday mornings, 10am until noon from 23rd February to 23rd March inclusive. The discussions will be based on the musical *Hamilton*, and specifically the songs from it. The book to accompany the course is *The Room Where It Happens* by Bishop Rose Hudson-Wilkin and can be downloaded to Kindle or a hard copy purchased. The venue will be decided once we know how many folk might come along, so if you are interested just have a chat with Abigail or Robin.

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 27th February at 10am. All welcome!

Communion Services: These will take place on Sunday 1st March at Longniddry Parish Church (9.45am and 6.30pm) and at Gladsmuir Parish Church (11am). Any member of any branch of Christ's Church is very welcome to join us in the Sacrament.

Community Art Group: With the arrival of the new year, our art group is meeting from 2-4pm on Thursday afternoons is taking as its theme for the new term, "Spring Comes to Longniddry". This will involve silk painting and iPad art. Come along to Longniddry Church's Room 2 and join the fun, which comes free of charge! More details from Ann Hyde or Robin.

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. (Contact Janet: 07766 574123).

Sporting Memories Group: Thursdays from10.30am–12 noon in Room 3, Longniddry Church.

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