

THE SUNDAY FOCUS

Weekly Worship from Gladsmuir & Longniddry Parish Churches

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Today's Bible reading

Psalm 73:1-14 ("Plea for Relief from Oppressors")

Truly God is good to the upright, to those who are pure in heart.
But as for me, my feet had almost stumbled; my steps had nearly slipped.
For I was envious of the arrogant; I saw the prosperity of the wicked.
For they have no pain; their bodies are sound and sleek.
They are not in trouble as others are; they are not plagued like other people.
Therefore pride is their necklace; violence covers them like a garment.
Their eyes swell out with fatness; their hearts overflow with follies.
They scoff and speak with malice; loftily they threaten oppression.
They set their mouths against heaven, and their tongues range over the earth.
Therefore the people turn and praise them, and find no fault in them.
And they say, 'How can God know? Is there knowledge in the Most High?'
Such are the wicked; always at ease, they increase in riches.
All in vain I have kept my heart clean and washed my hands in innocence.
For all day long I have been plagued, and am punished every morning.
Amen. (NRSV)

Today's hymns

O Lord, thou art my God and King (CH100)

He is Lord, he is Lord (CH443)

Be thou my vision (CH465)

Praise the Lord, his glories show (CH152)

What is of ultimate importance to you? In order to give you an opportunity to mull that question over in your mind for a moment or two, I will now blether on for a spell, in the hope that your mind might process my question and maybe even offer you a well-considered answer.

And so to the blethering. Ask a footballer from Heart of Midlothian Football Club precisely what it is that could be of ultimate importance to them, and they might well say the winning the league in 2026. Exactly 40 years ago, if memory serves me right, they came oh-so-close only to have glory cruelly snatched away from them in the final game of the season. How appropriate it would be lift the cup now, stealing it away from Glasgow Rangers or Glasgow Celtic. But then ... after national glory, what about European triumph? Imagine the scene: Madrid's Estadio Metropolitano, the 5th of June 2027, as a little-known Edinburgh club lifts the Champions League trophy. Astonishment across Europe. Pandemonium across Gorgie.

No matter how much the Scottish Premier League might appear to be a Hearts player's ultimate ambition, other things - *even* greater things! - can appear over the horizon to become the new ultimate. So, with apologies to Hibernian fans, who clearly didn't get a look-in during my fantasy football rant, let us return to my question: what is of ultimate importance to you? Is it the health and wellbeing of your nearest and dearest? Could it be your longstanding plan to work very, very hard and raise your standard of living? Or maybe it's that day when the famous advertising slogan, "It could be *yooooou*", finally proves true? Clearly, different people can have different "ultimates".

Yes, there is something of the ultimate in each of these scenarios, as you reach a target and are able to breathe a sigh of relief in the full and certain knowledge that your goal has been attained. Yet just as with the Hearts footballer whose sights are set on Scottish glory only to see a new European ultimate opening up before them, so often each one of us seems keep wanting something else. Something more.

I recently came across a quotation worth considering: "Obsessions with the future can rob us of the gift of the present." I can see a certain attraction in this way of thinking: that for as long as we keep looking to the future with hill and glen, mountain and ravine metaphorically ranged out before us, we place ourselves in danger of missing out on the many virtues of the present: the feel of warm sand between our toes ... the smell of the pine trees in the forest behind us ... the sight of those wonderful dolphins leaping in front of us just beyond the beach.

Ah yes, living in the present is great and it is really rather important that each one of us should indeed live in the moment, grounded fair and square in the here and now, even as we look back to what has gone before and forward to that which is to come. But there can also be a firm place in our lives for "the ultimate" (whatever that might be). And as people of Christian conviction, I believe that we can place ourselves in the moment even as we look forward in faith away from the fleeting and the fading, towards something more right, more just, more ultimate. For each one of us there is a reality beyond the temporal, as we look to the horizon and see a greater goal. As one of today's hymns says so very powerfully:

*Riches I heed not, nor earth's empty praise, thou mine inheritance, now and always;
thou, and thou only, the first in my heart, High King of Heaven, my treasure thou art.*

The psalmist lived in a time and place very different from our own. He knew nothing of Heart of Midlothian, or sliced bread, or antibiotics or *Celebrity Traitors*. But the psalmist held certain things firmly in common with us and our 21st century

life experience. When he contemplates the corruption and disdain of many in his world, we can hear his words resonating in our own ears:

I was envious of the arrogant; I saw the prosperity of the wicked.

For they have no pain; their bodies are sound and sleek.

They are not in trouble as others are; they are not plagued like other people.

It can be very hard to see for ourselves the discord and confusion caused by people who (to our way of thinking) are fundamentally selfish individuals who have no time for the needs of others. We might ask: "Is the self-centred way any kind of way to live?" But then we look at their wealth and their influence, their possessions and their power, and we might well find ourselves siding with the psalmist in his envy of those who live bad lives yet who rake in the money and who wallow in the glory.

And so to the world-scene of today. It has been suggested that acquisitive superpower leaders are drawing the 21st century world into a future of competing empires in which Russia, China and the United States simply agree to carve up the world in support of their own current interests. According to this way of thinking, the Russians would eventually conquer certain territories in Ukraine, while China would take control of Taiwan and the Americans would walk into Greenland. It would matter not at all what the Ukrainians might think about Russian rule, or how the Taiwanese might react to some imposed unification. And as for the Greenlandic people? What are 56,000 people in the face of a President's geopolitical goals? (A President whose professional background is, after all, in high stakes real estate?)

Hear, then the words of the psalmist resonating once more with our current experience:

Their eyes swell out with fatness; their hearts overflow with follies.

They scoff and speak with malice; loftily they threaten oppression.

They set their mouths against heaven, and their tongues range over the earth.

Therefore the people turn and praise them, and find no fault in them.

Going by worldly standards of human glory, you can see how a philosophy of "might is right" can be appealing to a nation. Hitler, the cruel dictator, didn't come to power through a political coup, but through a deliberate policy of keeping his supporters on side. Stalin – also a cruel dictator – controlled his vast eastern empire not merely through the power of guns and bullets, but through selling a misreading of Karl Marx's political philosophy. Mao went so far as to keep the people rooted in a place of famine and misery while pretending to be some beneficent father figure for all China.

As Lord Acton noted in Victorian times: "Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Great men are almost always bad men, even when they exercise influence and not authority; still more when you superadd the tendency of the certainty of corruption by authority."

But all of this is partial rather than ultimate, and I suspect that the psalmist knows this well. For by the end of his psalm he gives us an insight from far beyond the here and now of our world's many troubles. Here is what he says ... and says to us:

... when I thought how to understand this, it seemed to me a wearisome task, until I went into the sanctuary of God; then I perceived their end. ... My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion for ever. Indeed, those who are far from you will perish; you put an end to those who are false to you. But for me it is good to be near God; I have made the Lord God my refuge, to tell of all your works. [Emphasis added]

No matter today's world order, there is an ultimacy ... which is God's. Amen.

Praying for others

Our Father,
today we think of parents caught in the vice of addiction.
We ask that all of us in your Church reach out and do what we can to support them
and help them control their addiction and reclaim their lives,
for their sakes and their children's.
We ask your blessing on them as they try.
We pray for children and young people caught in the trap of addiction in their
families. We think of the poor care they may receive,
of the turmoil and disruption to their lives.
Bless them and their families and friends that they may find solace, peace and help.
We ask your blessing on everyone who works to help youngsters
struggling to make their way in families affected by addiction.
Bless their teachers, social workers and healthcare professionals
as they do what they can for these young people.
We pray for the CrossReach Sunflower project in Edinburgh
and everyone who works in it.
We pray for this congregation and everyone else who supports CrossReach,
that we may be generous. We pray for friends and family of those affected by
addiction, taking on extra responsibility to care for children whose parents cannot.
Give them strength, courage and hope.
Father, we ask this in the name of your Son. 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.

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 from 10.30am-12 noon in Room 3, Longniddry Church.