

THE SUNDAY FOCUS

Weekly Worship from Gladsmuir & Longniddry Parish Churches

Issue 340

27th September 2026

Online at www.longniddrychurch.org.uk

Today's Bible reading

Luke 17:11-19 ("Jesus Cleanses Ten Lepers")

On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee. As he entered a village, ten lepers approached him. Keeping their distance, they called out, saying, 'Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!' When he saw them, he said to them, 'Go and show yourselves to the priests.' And as they went, they were made clean. Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. He prostrated himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan. Then Jesus asked, 'Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they? Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?' Then he said to him, 'Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well.' Amen. (NRSV)

Today's hymns

And can it be that I should gain (CH396)

Amazing grace, how sweet the sound (CH555)

Make me a channel of your peace (CH528)

O Jesus, I have promised (CH644; t: Thornbury)

The story of the ten lepers is one that has always intrigued me, and for a range of different reasons. First of all, a really basic issue: Luke makes a point of saying that the drama takes place while Jesus, “was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee”. Do we really need to know that? And if so, why? Also, there is the issue of the ten men who were living with leprosy, a disease which (thanks to modern medicine) we don’t have much awareness of in 21st century Scotland - so that itself may pose a problem for us. And then, there’s that bit where Jesus sends the men off to the priests, almost as though he is passing them on to someone else in a very “un-Jesus-like” way. All very confusing, though it should be said that there are professors of New Testament Studies out there who are paid to come up with answers so that mere parish ministers can come up with sermons. And so it is that last Monday I reached for my “Luke” instalment of the enormous 42-volume “Interpretation Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching” series. This was penned in 1990 by the late, great Fred B. Craddock, Professor of Preaching and New Testament at Emory University, Atlanta, and a southern gentleman from Tennessee whose books I am always happy to dive into. If anyone can, thought I, then Craddock can. And, as it turned out, I was happily proved right. So bear with me as I delve deep into the thinking of one of biblical studies’ great names. And I hope that you find the journey as useful as I did.

Let’s start with that issue of where the story is set. Looked at on a purely geographical level, the Jewish territory of Galilee (in which Jesus was raised) lies side-by-side with the enemy land of Samaria, where the Samaritans come from. So, on the face of it at least, it seems that Galilee is to Samaria what Denmark is to Germany or, indeed, what Scotland is to England - different historical places and cultures with different historical rivalries and enmities. But it might just be that the gospel writer Luke is getting a bit playful with his readers when he writes of “the region between” the two. To our modern way of thinking, what lies between two territories would be nothing more than a line, a boundary, a border, maybe even a fence or a wall, the purpose of which would be to carve up and divide off with laser-like precision. But that would be to look at this region with modern eyes.

As Fred Craddock says: “... references to places cannot be lined up on a route from Galilee to Judaea. Geography is sometimes literary, sometimes theological, and sometimes physical. Here the border between Galilee and Samaria is a fitting location for a story involving both Jews and a Samaritan.”

I take this to mean that Jesus is wandering through an area where there is quite a religious and social mix. Not necessarily a place where peoples come together and overcome their differences, because when it came to Jews and Samaritans, their differences always posed difficulties for both camps. Having said that, however, it might be that the nine Jews and the one Samaritan of this story did have something important which bonded them together as a tiny, tight-knit society. They had leprosy: a disease which excluded them from wider society and which (we can well imagine) might well have created a powerful community of interest based around both their common illness and the their shared experience of cruel rejection. In Jesus’ time, these ten men were outcasts, no matter their nationality.

So what can we say about this disease which, more than most, divided up the so-called “clean” from the so-called “unclean”? Craddock tells us that lepers had to keep themselves distant from non-lepers, as seen in the Old Testament book of Leviticus, one of whose ancient laws requires this:

A person who has a dreaded skin disease must wear torn clothes, leave his hair uncombed,

cover the lower part of his face, and call out, "Unclean, unclean!" He remains unclean as long as he has the disease, and he must live outside the camp, away from others.

Think about the order of the Old Testament's first books: Genesis ... Exodus ... Leviticus. This regulation dates back a long, long time before Jesus, forming a foundation of separation and discrimination that would have made the term "leper" a word which carried huge stigma, 20 centuries ago. Indeed, I dare say that this same ancient stigma continues right down to the present day. And that, of course, had consequences. In the Second Book of Kings we read this:

Now there were four leprous men outside the city gate, who said to one another, 'Why should we sit here until we die?'

The implication in those words is both sad and simple: if you contracted leprosy, you would be banished from domestic and civic life. Your best bet for survival would be to group together with others who lived with the disease, because no-one else was going to come close. Craddock goes further, saying, "they positioned themselves near trafficways in order to make appeals for charity." So what comes through stories such like is how grindingly tough it must have felt to be a leper.

Lastly, then, what can we say about Jesus sending the ten men off to the priests? Once more, Craddock takes us back to the Old Testament for some clarification. Chapter 4 of the Book of Leviticus takes more than 1,500 words to describe the rituals involved in a priest determining that a sufferer of leprosy has been healed. The process involved washing and shaving and entering into a safe period of quarantine. But the key point here is that priests did indeed play a part in determining whether someone could be allowed back.

And so to the text from Luke's gospel. Here is what Luke says about the order of events involving the healing of the ten:

On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee. As he entered a village, ten lepers approached him. Keeping their distance, they called out, saying, 'Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!' When he saw them, he said to them, 'Go and show yourselves to the priests.' And as they went, they were made clean. [Emphasis added.]

Yes, as they went, they were made clean. What is being said in these words is that following a cry for help ("Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!") Jesus responds by resorting to the standard procedure: sending them away to the priests. Yet in this story, Jesus does so before he has healed them. He knows that the leprosy is still exactly as it was five minutes earlier, or maybe even five years earlier. Yet he issues a challenge to leave for that priestly encounter, even though no self-respecting priest would give them an audience if they turned up with leprosy.

What do the ten men do? It seems that they don't debate the merits of going to the religious authorities. They simply place their trust in Jesus, setting out in faith. And it is in that journey of faith that the healing takes place. On the road from despair to fresh hope, their faith in Jesus makes them well.

And as they went, they were made clean. Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. He prostrated himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan. Then Jesus asked, 'Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they? Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?' Then he said to him, 'Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well.

Let's give the last word to Fred Craddock: "The word translated "made well" is the same word often translated 'to be saved'. What we have, then, is a story of ten being healed and one being saved." Amen.

Praying for others

We come before you, Lord, as people that the rest of the world may see as clean, untainted. But we know that external appearances do not reflect internal lives.

We think of all those whose bodies are seen by others to reflect some inner sin or guilt - those who are disabled and find it hard to be accepted in their society or to access the support they need. We ask that their friends and neighbours look beyond their physical challenges to the whole person, and work to help them, and live together as one society.

We give thanks for all those who rise above the restrictions of their bodies and minds – for those like Sir Chris Hoy, Baroness Tanni Grey-Thomson and Sir Stephen Fry – who devote their lives to encouraging us to see the life beyond the challenge, to see and celebrate the whole person, to help with treatments.

We ask your blessing on them and all the many unsung people who work so hard to improve the lives of those whose bodies don't conform to our norms.

We pray that we all strive to see the inner person, to value them and let them give expression to their own unique talents and abilities.

Father, we ask this in the name of your Son. Amen.

Weekly Updates ...

Longniddry Fruit Festival 2026: This year's inaugural event is on Saturday 3rd October at Longniddry Church, from 1-4pm. Come along and enjoy the produce of the village, transformed by local cooks into jams, chutneys and so much more!

Harvest Thanksgiving Services: These will take place on Sunday 4th October in Longniddry Church at 9.45am and Gladsmuir Church at 11am. Donations of non-perishable items (tins, packets, jars, etc.) will benefit the work of East Lothian Foodbank.

Autumn Concert!: Come to Longniddry Church on Thursday 8th October at 7pm to hear the transition musicians of Longniddry Primary School and Preston Lodge High School perform pieces they have been learning. Interval refreshments provided by Longniddry Gala Committee. Admission by donation, with proceeds benefiting the schools' music activities and the Gala.

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

Community Art Group: All welcome to come along on Thursdays at 2.15pm in Longniddry Church, Room 2. Free of charge.