

THE SUNDAY FOCUS

Weekly Worship from Gladsmuir & Longniddry Parish Churches

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Today's Bible readings

Mark 8:22-26 ("Jesus Cures a Blind Man in Bethsaida")

They came to Bethsaida. Some people brought a blind man to him and begged him to touch him. He took the blind man by the hand and led him out of the village; and when he had put saliva on his eyes and laid his hands on him, he asked him, 'Can you see anything?' And the man looked up and said, 'I can see people, but they look like trees, walking.' Then Jesus laid his hands on his eyes again; and he looked intently and his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly. Then he sent him away to his home, saying, 'Do not even go into the village.' AMEN. (NRSV)

Mark 10:46-52 ("The Healing of Blind Bartimaeus")

They came to Jericho. As he and his disciples and a large crowd were leaving Jericho, Bartimaeus son of Timaeus, a blind beggar, was sitting by the roadside. When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout out and say, 'Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!' Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out even more loudly, 'Son of David, have mercy on me!' Jesus stood still and said, 'Call him here.' And they called the blind man, saying to him, 'Take heart; get up, he is calling you.' So throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus. Then Jesus said to him, 'What do you want me to do for you?' The blind man said to him, 'My teacher, let me see again.' Jesus said to him, 'Go; your faith has made you well.' Immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way. Amen. (NRSV)

Today's hymns

For everyone born, a place at the table (CH685)

When I needed a neighbour (CH544)

All hail the power of Jesus' name (CH457)

Rejoice, the Lord is King (CH449)

This week we will be visited by Carol Finlay of the Church of Scotland, who will be telling us about how our Jar of Grace appeal for 2024 will be benefiting children in Eastern Himalaya. Robin's sermon printed below is from 2020, and covers Carol's chosen Bible text.

Today we are considering two healing stories of Jesus. I don't know if you spotted it in the first reading, but as miracle stories of Jesus go, this one is really unusual because the miracle didn't happen fully at the first attempt.

Ever since I was a child I have always found this a weird, perplexing story, partly because Mark is clearly choosing to tell us about a healing that took a couple of goes to come good. This is Jesus after all, so why are we being told about his weakness, rather than his strength? Mark could have taken his blue pencil and edited out that bit about people who looked "like trees, walking". We'd have been none the wiser, and Jesus would have looked all the more impressive. The good news here is that we are not alone in this. Biblical scholars have looked at this story and they too have wondered why it's there in Mark's gospel.

Some 70 years ago, the big name in the world of popular biblical writing was the Rev Professor William Barclay of Glasgow University. In the 1950s, Barclay wrote about this passage, and here is what he said:

"In one thing this miracle is unique – it is the only miracle which can be said to have happened gradually. Usually Jesus' miracles happened suddenly and completely. In this miracle the blind man's sight came back in stages.

There is symbolic truth here. No-one sees all God's truth ... all at once."

In those two final sentences we find a tight little summing up of what Mark is doing with the story of the two-part healing. There is symbolic truth here. The problem is that you wouldn't know it without knowing the layout of Mark's gospel, so thank goodness for those clever people who can look at a book in a really insightful way and show us truths that would otherwise pass us by.

If we are to understand why Mark put this miracle in his gospel (and why it tells its story, warts and all) then we need to realise the writing technique that Mark is using as he structures his stories. It's a technique that has come to be known as "bookending". Now we all know what bookends are. They can be very decorative things, or very simple, functional things, but the purpose of a pair of bookends is to keep all your stories ordered together in one place. So you might buy yourself three sets of bookends. Between two of them you place your collection of Agatha Christie Poirot tales. Between another two you place your collection of Colin Dexter Inspector Morse books. Between the third pair you place your collection of Anne Cleaves Shetland fiction. What, then, are bookends all about? They are indeed about keeping important stories ordered together in one place.

Now, those brainy Bible specialists tell us that our wee short reading from Mark chapter 8 should really be seen as the first in a pair of literary "bookends". What on earth does that mean? It means that this story about sight being restored in a couple of stages comes at the very, very beginning of a themed section of Mark's gospel. And the clever Bible people know this to be the case because they can point to not just one bookend, but two bookends that work together, quite a wide distance apart. So where exactly is bookend number 2? If you want to track down that second bookend you have to read through a whole lot of stories:

- ♦ Peter's declaration of faith in Jesus as the Messiah;
- ♦ Jesus passing on his uncomfortable prediction about his suffering and death that are to come;

- ✦ The story of the Transfiguration when Jesus' call from God is confirmed in the presence of his closest friends;
- ✦ Jesus healing the son of a man who humbly admits that while he has faith he doesn't have enough;
- ✦ Jesus speaking about his death again;
- ✦ On and on it goes in a similar way, showing again and again what it means simply to place your trust in Jesus, and showing again and again that the disciples simply don't understand what Jesus is about.

Then, deep into Mark chapter 10, we come across our second of today's readings from Mark's gospel. There we find Mark's second bookend: another blind man; another healing; but this time a healing that works not second time around, but first. Why? Why this story? Why here?

This second healing of blindness is rounding off a whole section where Jesus is trying (not too successfully) to heal the disciples of their misconceptions; trying to show them what it takes for him to be a suffering servant Messiah; trying to turn them away from that spiritual blindness which has had such a selfish focus on "me, me, me". With the arrival of that second bookend (the blind Bartimaeus story) Mark has brought us near to the very gates of Jerusalem and the start of Holy Week.

The second bookend closes off that section of teaching just in time for the big drama, effectively saying this: that even in the shadow of the Cross, the disciples *still* don't understand. They need a second application of Jesus, and a third, and a fourth ... And even still, from Palm Sunday all the way through to Easter Day, they just won't see it, so mired are they in their spiritual blindness. And as we've said in church many times before, the continuing failure of the disciples is a big theme of Mark.

But not everyone is a failure in Mark's stories. Blind Bartimaeus understands and so he places his complete, humble trust in Jesus. "Son of David," he cries, "have mercy on me!", leaping up and rushing to the healer's side. The blind man has a strong faith in Jesus which the disciples refused to allow into their lives. They thought that going on the road with their friend would give them a broad and easy avenue leading all the way to glory and prestige.

How wrong they turned out to be! There is symbolic truth here. No-one sees all God's truth ... all at once.

That, I would say, is certainly true of Jesus's closest friends. They don't see the truth: a spiritual truth which lies "in full view" of blind Bartimaeus.

Noting the selfishness of the disciples, one 21st century commentator has said this about Mark's bookended teaching on true discipleship:

"... following Jesus isn't just about getting what I want or fulfilling my ambitions, it is about becoming what God wants. We sometimes think that Christian faith or being part of the church is mainly about enriching my life and meeting my needs. We may even complain that church "isn't doing anything for me." When we think it's all about us, we need a second touch, too. We need things cleared up so that we learn to ask a better question: Today, how am I to follow Jesus, to serve God, and to be an instrument of God's purposes and grace?"

By the grace of God, our spiritual sight can be restored, bit by bit, divine touch by divine touch, until we too see with clarity and true vision. Amen.

Praying for others

This prayer concerns our "Jar of Grace Appeal 2024" for "Balls, books and bangles".

God of all the earth,
we thank you for the work of the Anju-SUMI School in Nimbong,
educating the young people of Eastern Himalaya.

Bless the students in their studies which will change their lives and in some cases
transform whole communities in time to come.

Be with the teachers in the challenging task of running a school
where access is limited, with resources scarce and demands very great.

We ask that great benefits will flow from investing in balls, books and bangles which
will play their part in sports, in literacy and in dance.

May the bonds of friendship and fellowship between the Churches of Eastern
Himalaya and Scotland bear great fruit, as together we grow in love and
understanding, sharing in the love of Christ together.

In Jesus' Name we pray. Amen.

Weekly Updates ...

Summer services: Our services at Longniddry (9.45am) and Gladsmuir (11am) will cover eight Sundays, starting next Sunday (23rd) and running through to 11th August. They will take as their theme: "Speaking the Gospel Today", using David Male and Paul Weston's *The Word's Out*. This very readable book on mission and outreach points us towards new ways of sharing our faith in a 21st century context, and should offer many insights into being the church in a secular society.

Postcard challenge: Members of our churches are being invited to send in postcards and/or digital photographs showing where they have been in the balmy, sunny days of summer. This year's themes are "Gateways" and "Doorways", offering all sorts of photographic, artistic, geographical and theological possibilities. What out for the right pictures and send them on to Derek Easton at 74 Glassel Park Road, Longniddry EH32 0TA or derekeaston@btinternet.com.

Gladsmuir Coffee and Craft Group: Fortnightly on a Wednesday from 10-11.30am in Gladsmuir Church. Come along on 26th June for the next friendly gathering. All welcome!

Longniddry Gardens Open Day: Sunday 23rd June, 1-5pm. Eight gardens in the village - three managed by church members - will be open to enjoy. Entry to all eight is £8 and proceeds will be shared between National Gardens Scotland, Blood Bikes Scotland and Parkinson's UK. Buy tickets at "The Cottage", Gosford Road, "Greyfriars", Kings Road or "Roma", Links Road.

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.