

# THE SUNDAY FOCUS

Weekly Worship from Gladsmuir & Longniddry Parish Churches

Issue 223

30th June 2024

Online at [www.longniddrychurch.org.uk](http://www.longniddrychurch.org.uk)

## Today's Bible reading

*Acts 17:22-32 ("Paul in Athens")*

Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, 'Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, "To an unknown god." What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us. For "In him we live and move and have our being"; as even some of your own poets have said, "For we too are his offspring."

Since we are God's offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals. While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.'

When they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some scoffed; but others said, 'We will hear you again about this.' Amen. (NRSV)

## Today's hymns

*Amazing grace* (CH555)

*Lord, bless and pity us* (CH45)

*The Lord Is King* (CH129)

**W**e live in a secular society. This has been an indisputable fact of life for the last half century at least. Looking back on my early childhood in the 1960s, I remember being surprised to find how few of my friends ever went to church. I was shocked to discover that two of my cousins had never been baptised! Didn't that happen *to everyone*??? Teenage years proved similar. And as I entered into adult life I had to explain to colleagues at the University of Aberdeen that, no, I couldn't join them for Sunday brunch at 11 o'clock because I would be at St Machar's Cathedral (but I'll be with you for 1pm). Church was a minority interest. While many people of Christian faith continue with Sunday habits and rituals often inherited from parents or grandparents, the wider community sees the day of rest as being the day of leisure, or of family, or of snoozing, or indeed of doing yet more work. And so our country has come to lose "the God habit". As long ago as 2007 the charity Tearfund estimated that two-thirds of the adult population "now have no connection whatever with church," and that "churchgoing simply is not on their agenda". We can choose to paint this reality in whatever way we choose, but - truly - that would get us nowhere because the dull, grey reality is this: Christianity in the UK has so often and so consistently failed to communicate the Gospel of Jesus Christ in ways which actually connect with people in the parish and wider world.

In their book, *The Word's Out*, David Male and Paul Weston put forward two reasons for this sad and familiar situation. Firstly, a rapid decline in church attendance since the early 1960s which has changed the vocabulary, the stories, the metaphors of ordinary people. At primary school I knew a wee boy who was built like a rugby forward. He claimed to possess "the strength of Samson", and kids understood what he meant. That kind of biblical metaphor was still alive back then. Say that today, and how many kids - how many teachers??? - would get it? Society is talking a different language to the language of the Christian, so the cultural foundations which had once been so powerful (through the King James Bible, Shakespeare, the great hymn-writers) have been expunged from the public mind. Words like "incarnation", "salvation", "atonement", "covenant", mean little or nothing to most people because these terms have no place in their ordinary living - it's as simple as that. And so the words which practising Christians use (whether in church services or in theological discussion) have become marooned, devoid of any kind of broader usage which might link society to Church, and vice versa.

But there is a much bigger reason why the Church fails to connect in this changing world: the crumbling public face of Christianity. Often we are perceived through old Christian buildings and old Christian statues and old Christian headstones from centuries gone by. And there is a strange contradiction here. Go to Florence or to Venice and you will see people queuing for hours whether in baking sun or pouring rain to get into the Duomo or the Basilica. They will pay lots of money to share in the thrill of truly astonishing religious architecture and to marvel at religious artworks all around. But when it comes to ordinary church buildings, with empty notice boards and flaking paint and wee sycamores growing out of the cracked and creaking stonework, the public eye identifies a religion which is rooted in the past.

Make no mistake, we who are in the Church "get" the language. And yes, we are in awe of our buildings and love what we hold to be so familiar. But that's not the point. What is at issue here is that for as long as we cater for those on the inside of church life, we risk being unaware of how lifeless we appear to those on the outside. What should we do? After all, it looks pretty much like the Church is a group of people who speak a language which is actually proving to be the wrong language. It

also appears that across the Church as a whole we occupy buildings which we rightly hold to be glorious and precious but which are not serving the wider community in ways which speak of the Gospel of Christ, alive and relevant.

Perhaps when it comes to reaching out with the message of Jesus and the invitation of the Church we might feel tempted to throw in the towel. Instead, we might decide that we'll just carry on singing, "Will you come and follow me?" while knowing that the answer might very well be ... "No." So should we give up? Male and Weston give us all sorts of reasons for fresh hope in our day and age, if only we will realise where we find ourselves positioned now, and how we can manoeuvre ourselves to a far more appropriate starting point for meaningful, effective mission.

A key word of warning: let us keep firmly in mind that people in this post-modern society of ours are highly suspicious of any "top-down" imposition of ideas. People are rightly opposed to having propositions and theologies forced inside their free-thinking heads. The line, "Thou shalt do exactly as we have done over the last 'x' generations" ... really ... doesn't ... work.

But people's fear of institutional religion does not mean that people are not spiritual.

A few months ago I had the huge pleasure of attending a lecture given by the composer Sir James MacMillan, who is a Roman Catholic Christian whose career has involved the creation of many glorious religious works, not least a choral piece for the funeral of The Queen. The rather unlikely subject for his address was "Chant: the music of faith and its influence on the history of music". And it was brilliant.

The reason for telling you this is that early on in his lecture he told the audience that as he travels the world to conduct great orchestras and choirs, he finds his pieces typically being performed in concert halls, not churches. And when people come, they want to come ... they decide to buy an expensive ticket with their hard-earned cash ... they look forward to meeting with other people, so making this a communal event, and ... they wish to listen to music which speaks to them of Christian faith.

The people who do this might be Christians or they might not, but many will be actively seeking to engage with an experience - a culture - which lies beyond their everyday material experience. Many will be excited to explore a certain something called "the numinous". The numinous. (And what a glorious word that is.)

If something is numinous then it has a spiritual quality suggesting the presence of the divine. I adore the word, "numinous" because it speaks to me of engaging with mystery rather than being about spoon-fed religious doctrine. To pursue the numinous is to be open to the possibility of God not just in a designated building but *anywhere*. "The numinous" recognises an experience which defies categorising ... which refuses to be hemmed in by our dull institutional systems and structures.

Male and Weston put it very neatly when they give us these hope-filled words: "... we need to remember that we are not speaking into a culture where the concept of faith is absent - far from it. The New Testament writers assume more readily than we do that there is a religious dimension to cultural life in all its forms, and that faith is habitually being expressed, even if in ways that are not immediately identified or acknowledged. At Athens, for example, the apostle Paul starts his speech at the Areopagus by noting 'how extremely religious you are in every way' (Acts 17:22). ... Paul's main intention is not to manufacture faith where there is none, but rather to redirect existing faith towards its proper goal: 'What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.'"

Search out the numinous in your life. Then, dwell on how you can share it. Amen.

## Praying for others

Lord,  
as the General Election approaches this coming week and  
the campaigns of the various parties enter their final phase,  
we ask your blessing on all candidates.  
Give them compassion and understanding  
so their campaigns don't descend into personal attacks.  
Guide them to stand for what they believe is right without denigrating anyone else.  
We ask for wisdom for those who are voted in as MPs on Thursday.  
We pray you guide their actions whether in government or opposition  
so that they always keep at the heart of what they do  
the most vulnerable in our society and work to improve their lives.  
We give thanks that we are free to cast our votes at all and that they can have some  
effect on the government of our nation.  
We remember the many millions of people who are disenfranchised – either having  
no vote or one that is utterly meaningless in a one-party state.  
We pray that leaders learn to listen to you and to put aside their own desire for  
power and riches, and govern for the good of all their people.  
We ask all this in Jesus' name. Amen.

## Weekly Updates ...

**Christian Aid Week:** The Christian Aid team would like to thank everyone who supported this year's Christian Aid Week activities, whether in growing plants, buying plants, delivering envelopes and leaflets or making donations. In total, just over £3,370 was raised.

**Postcard challenge:** Members of Gladsmuir and Longniddry 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. Send your shots on to Derek Easton at 74 Glassel Park Road, Longniddry EH32 0TA or [derekeaston@btinternet.com](mailto:derekeaston@btinternet.com).

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

**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.