

# THE SUNDAY FOCUS

Weekly Worship from Gladsmuir & Longniddry Parish Churches

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## Today's Bible reading

*Isaiah 40:1-8 ("God's People are Comforted")*

Comfort, O comfort my people,  
says your God.  
Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,  
and cry to her  
that she has served her term,  
that her penalty is paid,  
that she has received from the Lord's hand  
double for all her sins.

A voice cries out:  
'In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord,  
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.  
Every valley shall be lifted up,  
and every mountain and hill be made low;  
the uneven ground shall become level,  
and the rough places a plain.  
Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed,  
and all people shall see it together,  
for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.'

A voice says, 'Cry out!'  
And I said, 'What shall I cry?'  
All people are grass,  
their constancy is like the flower of the field.  
The grass withers, the flower fades,  
when the breath of the Lord blows upon it;  
surely the people are grass.  
The grass withers, the flower fades;  
but the word of our God will stand for ever. Amen. (NRSV)

## Today's hymns

*All Things Bright And Beautiful (CH137)*

*This is the day (CH194)*

*Be Thou my vision (CH465)*

The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand for ever. So says the prophet Isaiah in a passage which is often read in church at some point or other in the season of Advent. Isaiah gives us something to cling to in this passage; something to look forward to as we come to see that no matter how many aspects of life might change around us, God stands for something beyond time - something that is eternal! With these words of mystery we can move forward, confident that the Good News of Jesus Christ applies as much today as it has ever done over the last two millennia. Yet, in the back of our minds there may be a doubt.

In our summer services we are looking at what it means to be a missional Church. We have recognised that a passive approach to evangelism has resulted in congregations which are happy, settled and declining, while the active approach taken in Africa, Asia and Latin America has seen the Christian faith take root, with churches positively growing. We have recognised that while our northern European society is undoubtedly secular, it is also a society which is open to "the numinous": the mystery of the divine, not necessarily related to firm religious belief.

Today we are going to be asking the question: What is evangelism? For many Scots, the term evangelism immediately brings to mind either the Billy Graham "All Scotland Crusade" of 1955 or the Luis Palau Mission to Glasgow in 1981: each a large scale, full-on season of evangelistic oratory, spanning several weeks, with each service offering an opportunity for personal commitment to Christ (the call being made towards the end of an evening of passionate music and open-Bible preaching).

That approach was highly structured, very formal and dependent upon people choosing to turn out, giving up their free time to answer a public call to draw near to the Christ of their salvation. It was tied into a format which presented a clearly defined opportunity for individuals to accept Jesus as their Lord and Saviour. As such, it took a stadium or a hall full of complete strangers and made to each an offer of Christian faith. There was a successful track record here, as many can attest.

That approach to Christian outreach was dramatic, staged on a large (and often impressive) scale. But ... there are more ways than one to offer people hope in Christ. Indeed, it may be that Dr Graham and Dr Palau used methods of the past which would be culturally inappropriate to the world of the present and the future.

This issue is one which occupies the attention of Paul Weston, co-author of the book we are using this summer, entitled *The Word's Out*. Are we to think of Graham-style evangelistic initiatives of the past as having a future in the Church of today and tomorrow? Here is his answer - an answer which I take to be very useful:

"'Evangelism' is one of those words that tends to conjure up all the wrong kinds of mental image: the intrusive salesman, the insistent Christian, the big black Bible, the preacher's embarrassing altar calls, and so forth. If you repeat the word fast and often enough, you can even be mistaken for talking about [not 'evangelism', but] 'vandalism' - which fits the negative stereotype beautifully and emphasises the political incorrectness of evangelism in a culturally pluralistic society. So there's some rescuing to do if we are to shed the negative cultural overtones often associated with the idea of evangelism and begin to think more positively about it."

Weston then poses the question: "But how?" Yes indeed, how are we to break from the big, institutional missions of the past in order to free ourselves up for living out our God-given faith in new, vibrant ways appropriate to the current age? And actually, if we pause to dwell upon that simple "But how?" question, perhaps we might find the answer staring us in the eye. Indeed, as we look for a simple way of

describing the evangelism of the future, I would say this: it should be one which shares our God-given Christian faith among our neighbours, with our neighbours. That's how.

In the weeks to come we will be looking at this issue - and what an issue it is for the Church of Scotland in our time, as our denomination wrestles with a crisis of social identity and cultural confidence which has so often gone unchecked all across our world. Over those now many years since the Second World War, the hard fact is that so very, very much has changed in society, not least in terms of organised, common goals and aspirations. And right here in Scotland we can identify the Church as a once great body now with fewer members, fewer ministers, less money and (I suspect) less vision than at any point in living memory. The problem may have arisen for our parents' generation but it has become a tough reality on our watch.

One question is well worth posing here: are we alone in this institutional decline? As we'll see, the answer to this question is a resounding "No, we are not."

The Church of Scotland as we have known it in our lifetimes has been (and in many senses remains) a product of the modern world which spanned the mid-17th century to the mid-20th century: the world of the Empire; of the Enlightenment; of the World Wars; and, indeed, even of the Holocaust. (And note here, how these words come with capital letters, showing just how significant each has become in the setting of global history.) Modernity was a period of human activity in which mental systems became vital. Modernity displayed itself as a period in which social structures. Modernity can be looked back on from where we now are as an era of science and innovation which ended up bringing us penicillin on the one hand and nuclear weapons on the other. But the world into which we were born has proved to be very different from the modern world of our grandparents or great-grandparents.

To understand where we now are, we first need to "get" the move away from the certainties of modernity to the uncertainties of an emerging postmodernity:

- ✦ The 1950s saw the arrival of rock and roll (where "music" became "NOISE!") and also the advent of consumer credit (with its promise of "buy now, pay later");
- ✦ The 1960s saw new freedoms such as the contraceptive pill (liberating women in a whole range of ways) and also the rejection by many people of social conformity;
- ✦ The 1970s saw the advance of computer technology and the first signs of how our industrial, commercial and social structures might be heading into major decline;
- ✦ The 1980s saw the Thatcher / Reagan revolution with a disdain for large government and a delight in the "fun, love and money" approach of the yuppie;
- ✦ The 1990s saw a multimedia world of connectedness and the global dominance of that remarkable tool, e-mail, which would in turn lead on to social media.

The whole ... wide ... world witnessed an unprecedented fragmentation throughout the second half of the 20th century: a fragmentation through which political parties, trade unions, the arts, amateur clubs and societies - and, yes! - churches have struggled to keep themselves relevant. These days both the individual and the family seem increasingly to operate in a small and often highly self-referential bubble in which the economic and social realities of the past no longer apply.

Through all of this, we find ourselves like rabbits in the headlights, unable to tell what is coming our way. Yet, our faith points us back to God. And it is to God in his great mercy that we will turn our attention next week.

*The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand for ever. Amen.*

## Praying for others

God of all time and space,  
in you we have our start and our end, our hope and our fulfilment.  
By your grace the Church continues to speak words of heavenly peace and  
earthly challenge to all the nations under heaven.

In a period of dramatic change when each generation struggles  
to make sense of what is going on, we ask for your guidance:  
may your Church learn to lay down its wealth of memory,  
and seek instead new ways of spreading your Gospel of truth,  
both here in this parish and far around the world.

Grant us a true vision, we pray, so that we might see how you wish your Church  
to move forward in faith, with the Good News of Jesus Christ,  
ready to speak to generations who live in need of your loving presence.

We pray for the young people of the Church of Scotland,  
so few in number yet so passionate in their faith.

May the older generations have the wisdom to allow  
new ways and fresh expressions to emerge  
to your great glory in days and years to come.

This we ask in Jesus' Name. Amen.

## Weekly Updates ...

**"Sing at 6.30":** Gladsmuir Parish Church will host its next "Big Sing" evening on Sunday 14th July when we will be presenting an evening showcasing the joy of music and featuring some of our amazing church organs. Our guest instrumentalist and preacher for this "Organ Extravaganza" will be our dear friend the Rev William Watt, assistant minister of Corstorphine Old Parish Church and our much-loved former student. Admission is free, with a retiring offering to benefit Christian Aid Scotland.

**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.