

ORPHIR and STENNESS CHURCH
Sunday 28th. August 2022
Proper 17C but *using 14C Readings*

Introduction and Intimations

Introduction and Prayer

Good morning. It's good to see you again. Welcome to our worship. Wherever you come from today, your presence enriches us all in this time of fellowship and celebration together.

Faith does not often come easily. So much can hold us back and weigh us down. But as for an athlete running a race, it is worth the struggle. We have the example of Jesus himself, and of all the saints and martyrs who faced terrible things before us as we seek encouragement from one another.

In a moment of quietness, let us let go of the cares and the worries of the past week, and know the presence of God among us.

Pause

Lord, we come together to worship you.
 We have stepped into this sacred space.
 Still our minds from the conflicts and tensions of the rush and bustle of the last week.
 Dispel all distractions so that we may focus on you. Amen.

Call to Worship:

Come, be inspired by the faith of our ancestors!
 Let us run with perseverance the race before us, looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith!
 Let us worship God:

1st. Hymn: 449 Rejoice the Lord is King

Opening Prayer and Lord's Prayer

We rejoice that the Lord our God is King, and Queen, and sovereign;
 that our God is ultimately in charge of all things, and in control of all things,
 including everything that concerns us.

We give thanks that our God rules in love and faithfulness,
 in justice and in truth, and will always do what is right.

We rejoice that God came among us in the person of Jesus,
 and that, in him, we see the true likeness of God.
 We rejoice in his death for us, and for the triumph of his resurrection,
 demonstrating that there is nothing in all the world
 that can separate us from the love of God.

Yet knowing all this, we recognise that, all too often,
 we allow God to go unacknowledged;
 that even in this last week he has often been far from our thoughts.

Loving God,
 this morning we acknowledge our great debt to you. We offer thanks, and we praise you
 for the many good gifts that flow from your hand; gifts that come undeserved,
 gifts we have enjoyed, yet too often take for granted.

Lord,
 you remember us when so often we forget you.
 You look after us, even when we are looking after no one but ourselves.
 You love us even when we ignore you, or even resent you.
 You are faithful even when we fail to trust you.
 Thank you for your patient, persistent love:
 for the forgiveness and renewal which we so badly need, and for which we ask again;
 and for the riches of your grace and mercy
 which you have made available to us through your Son, Jesus Christ.

Thank you for another Sunday,
 and for its reminder that Jesus is risen, and lives among us.
 Turn the eyes of our faith again to him and, by your Holy Spirit,
 speak to us through your Word,
 that our lives may be renewed in faith and obedience,
 and that we may live to your praise and glory,
 and to the blessing and encouragement of others, today and into the week ahead.
 In Jesus' name we ask, and in his words we pray together, saying:
*Our Father, who art in heaven,
 hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come.
 Thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven.
 Give us this day our daily bread.
 And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.
 And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
 For thine is the kingdom, and the power,
 and the glory, for ever. Amen.*

Readings:

In today's reading from Hebrews, the community are reminded of faith-filled people who came before and persevered despite trials and torture and death. They are reminded that they do not travel alone. They journey together, to lean on each other, and draw strength from the witness of those that went before. Jesus does not promise it will be easy: bad things lie ahead but we are encouraged to persevere through them.

In Luke's Gospel, Jesus warns that following his way is likely to bring conflict and division, even within a family. He also encourages people to see and understand what is really going on in the world, just as they understand that a cloud usually means rain.

Liz will read for us today.

1st Reading:

Hebrews 11:29-12:2 NRSVA:

By faith the people passed through the Red Sea as if it were dry land, but when the Egyptians attempted to do so they were drowned. By faith the walls of Jericho fell after they had been encircled for seven days. By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient, because she had received the spies in peace.

And what more should I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets - who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. Women received their dead by resurrection. Others were tortured, refusing to accept release, in order to obtain a better resurrection. Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned to death, they were sawn in two, they were killed by the sword; they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, persecuted, tormented - of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground.

Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better so that they would not, without us, be made perfect.

Chapter 12:

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.

Amen.

2nd Reading:

Luke 12:49-56; NRSVA:

Jesus the Cause of Division

'I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed! Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division! From now on, five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three; they will be divided:

father against son

and son against father,

mother against daughter

and daughter against mother,

mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law

and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law.'

Interpreting the Time

He also said to the crowds, 'When you see a cloud rising in the west, you immediately say, "It is going to rain"; and so it happens. And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, "There will be scorching heat"; and it happens. You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time.

Amen. Thanks be to God

2nd. Hymn 438 The Head that once was crowned with thorns

Message:

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

We don't know for sure who wrote the Letter to the Hebrews, but clearly it was written by a great teacher to a little group of Jewish converts to Christianity, to help them to understand how their new faith carries on from their old faith, and how Jesus Christ represents the fulfilment of the Old Testament. The writer is worried that, in the face of opposition and persecution, they are tempted to turn back from their commitment to Jesus and return to the old familiar "safe" Jewish rituals, so he writes with encouragement and reassurance. Reassurance to them – and to us as well.

He starts by telling us what faith is.

Faith is "the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." (NRSVA; 11:1).

That is, "being sure of the things we hope for and knowing that something is real even if we do not see it!" (NCV); "*a commitment in uncertainty*", as somebody said.

He reminds us of the commitment of some of the Old Testament heroes who kept the faith: men and women who not only demonstrated their faith, but, through that faith, accomplished great things for God. Through all the ups and downs of God's people, there were always some who kept faith with God.

Faith is about being able to look beyond the obvious, superficial things of the world to the spiritual realities – things we don't see, but nevertheless know to be true: things like the truth, and the trustworthiness, of God's promises. This trust was vital to the Christian faith then, just as it is now.

Our reading starts with the story of Moses and the crossing of the Red Sea. Moses acted on faith based on a close personal relationship with the living God. Likewise, the capture of Jericho came through an act of faith, through men who thought, not about what *they* could do, but about *what God could do for them and through them*; men who believed that God could and would turn their weakness into strength, equal to what seemed an impossible task. We must never leave God out of our reckoning.

Things that we find impossible to accomplish alone are always possible with God.

The writer reminds us of Rahab who protected the spies sent out by Joshua. By her faith, she and her family were saved. The Letter of James quotes her as a great example of *the good works that demonstrate faith* – justified by *works* as well as by faith.

The point is that all these great Old Testament figures of faith trusted in the promises of God – but they didn't receive what they were promised!

Here is the big difference: Christians believe in these same promises, but Christians have the advantage of *knowing* that the promises have been fulfilled in Jesus Christ, and of *receiving* the benefits that were promised:

*"Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had **provided something better**". (11:39 -40)*

Through their faith, and in many different situations, all these people became instruments of the saving power of God, even though they often faced all sorts of hardship and persecution in the process. The faith that they all demonstrated in their lives is meant to encourage us, but also to point forward to Jesus, the great deliverer, the '*author and perfecter of our faith*'. Jesus also suffered rejection, but through that rejection, and through his suffering, he obtained the full and final salvation, which the Old Testament promised.

Take heart from all these witnesses of the past, says the writer. It's like being in a race, cheered on by a great crowd of believers from the past, shouting encouragement like spectators at a marathon. And if that is not enough, fix your eyes on Jesus, "*the pioneer and perfecter of our faith*".

Remember how Jesus was prepared to accomplish all that was asked of him. Jesus showed the way. We are asked to follow. Jesus is both the basis of their faith, and ours: an example of faith for us all. Remember your past, and renew your courage and your sense of responsibility, says the writer. God's power has not grown less. What God did once, he can do again, for the God of history is the same God whom we worship today.

This message is important for us at a time of far-reaching changes within the church. Right now, the Church of Scotland is struggling to maintain hundreds of old and disintegrating buildings that no longer have congregations able to support them. Stromness Church is one of many churches scheduled to close because they do not meet the Church of Scotland criteria for '*well equipped spaces in the right places*'.

It does look as though our plans for upgrade of this church, Orphir & Stenness Church, will go ahead, and that will be a great benefit, not only to the church but to the community as well.

At a time when many congregations could very easily become discouraged and disillusioned, might lose heart; when people might start drifting away, or find some excuse to cut their ties

with the church, God is offering us a breathing space and a chance to gather our strength and gather our thoughts about how the ministry and the outreach of this church can develop and grow, the better to support and serve not only our own church people but the wider community.

We need to grow. Congregations everywhere are dwindling. People get older and less able, and we need younger, enthusiastic people, especially 'do-ers', to replace them. We could – should – must – be part of an exciting future.

What are we to do? First we need to get the plans for the redevelopment of this building financed and underway; and, at all times, especially in these times of change, we need to remember our reason for being: to proclaim the saving love of God as shown in Jesus Christ.

The first two verses of Hebrews 12 is one of the great, moving passages of the New Testament. The writer summarises the Christian life: it's like a race marked out for us, he says. The goal, the objective, is *nothing less than being like Jesus Christ*. In working towards that goal, we have an **inspiration**: not only the "great cloud of witnesses", but Jesus himself, cheering us on.

We also have a **handicap**: the handicap of our own sin. Like athletes – like a jockey - we need to get rid of our unnecessary baggage, our excess weight. And we need the help of Jesus to get rid of it. *How much baggage do you carry?*

In the Christian life we have the **means** to achieve the goal, and that is **perseverance**. The race of faith is a marathon, not a sprint. *Perseverance*: it really means steadfast endurance: keeping at it: keeping right on to the end. Remember the schoolboy rhyme: *If at first you don't succeed, persevere and keep the heid!*

Perseverance and commitment. In Luke, Jesus himself tells us that he came to bring not peace but division. (Luke 12: 51-53). In his person and in his teaching Jesus sifted people and divided people. "Whoever is not with me is against me." (Luke 11:23, NRSV).

You can't remain neutral to Jesus.

Are you with him, or against him?

Above all, in our Christian life we have the **example** and the presence of Jesus. The example of the Christ who identified with, and stood up for, the poor and the marginalised; who endured the shame and agony and rejection of death on the cross.

The **presence** of Jesus, who is not only the goal of our journey, but also our companion on the way. Jesus is the one we go to meet. He is also the one with whom we travel.

Surrounded by those who have gone before us, we are to press on, discounting everything but the goal set before us, and always in the company of the one who has already made the journey, already reached the goal, and who waits to welcome us when we reach the end.

For every one of us in this congregation; for those who attend and for those who do not; for every person in Orphir and Stenness, and throughout Orkney, everyone who expects the church to be there when it is needed, there is a goal set before us. The goal is to renew and to revitalise the church, locally and nationally, so that it can be once again a powerful force for Christ in this community.

The challenge, and the responsibility, are ours. We are the voice and the hands of Christ in this place.

*Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.
Amen. Soli Deo Gloria.*

3rd. Hymn: 536 May the mind of Christ my Saviour live in me from day to day,

Dedication of Offering and Prayers of Intercession.

Let us pray:

Lord of all,

As we bring our offering today,

we remember that it is not enough to bring you our money:

we bring ourselves, our time and our talents, asking that you will use all we do, all we say,

and all we are, for the growth of your kingdom and the fulfilment of your will,

in this place and in the world, through Jesus Christ our Lord,

Amen

Prayers of Intercession

Where do we start? War in Ukraine; floods in Pakistan; 9-year old child shot dead in Liverpool; new Prime Minister being chosen; church closures ...

Compassion – suffering along with..

Prayers for the World in which we live.

Gracious God,

We thank you for the good news of Jesus, and for his life, his death and resurrection, and for his example. Help us to live our everyday lives in a way that is true to him; true to that good news. Give us opportunity and courage to be ever ready to speak to others about him.

L: Lord, in your mercy,

All: Hear our prayer.

We pray for the Church, here, in the country and in the world;

for the Church of Scotland, and for those charged with making difficult decisions about its future structure and organisation;

for Christians in places where it is difficult and dangerous to be a Christian.

Lord, as we go out into another week, with all its opportunities and challenges,

we pray for all the people with whom we work, for all those we meet regularly:

colleagues – customers – pupils – patients, and all the others.

L: Lord, in your mercy,

All: Hear our prayer.

We pray for all those who do demanding and stressful jobs.

We pray for those in positions of authority or influence,

whose decisions affect the lives and living of other people.

May they have wisdom and understanding.

We pray for leaders of nations, that they may work for peace and goodwill throughout the world. We pray that war will come to an end and that peace with justice may be restored.

We pray especially for the people of Ukraine, and Ethiopia, Syria, Yemen, Afghanistan, and many more.

L: Lord, in your mercy,

All: Hear our prayer.

We pray for doctors and nurses, and for surgeons carrying out complex procedures;

for those looking after people in palliative care:

grant them kindness and compassion.

We pray for those who are stressed or unhappy at work;

those who experience bullying or stress or unpleasantness of any kind in their work place:

those who have long working hours, or poor conditions;
those who receive low pay, and little acknowledgment.

L: Lord, in your mercy,

All: Hear our prayer.

We pray for those in special need:
for the hungry, perplexed by a world of plenty:
for the bereaved, angry at a world that carries on regardless:
for the sick, weary of a world that embraces the healthy:
for the young, tempted by a world that offers so much:
for the old, disaffected by a world that prizes youth:
for all who struggle to keep the faith, that they may have perseverance.

We pray for those for whom we have special concerns today.

Pause

L: Lord, in your mercy,

All: Hear our prayer.

We pray for ourselves, our society, our community,
that, in Christ, we may be an influence for God, for the gospel, and the common good.
We ask all our prayers in Jesus' name.
Amen.

Choir: 'I am the breath of life'

Tailpiece

Easy Essay by Peter Maurin

The world would be better off
if people tried to become better.
And people would become better
if they stopped trying to be better off.
For when everybody tries to become better off,
nobody is better off.
But when everyone tries to become better,
everybody is better off.
Everybody would be rich
if nobody tried to become richer.
And nobody would be poor
if everybody tried to be the poorest.
And everybody would be what he ought to be,
if everybody tried to be
what he wants the other fellow to be.

4th. Hymn: 517 Fight the good fight

Blessing

Be inspired for the week ahead: inspired to persevere;
inspired to reach your goals. so that others may be inspired through you.
And the blessing of God almighty,
the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit,
be with you, and remain with you, now and always. Amen.

Doxology: Hy 786: Mat the God of peace go with us (Tune: Ae Fond Kiss)