

**ORPHIR and STENNESS CHURCH,
Sunday 6th August, 2023; Proper 13A
Morning Service 1100
Transcript**

Welcome and Intimations

Good morning. Wherever you come from today, whether you come regularly, or occasionally, perhaps even for the first time, you are welcome to our worship. Your presence enriches us in this time of celebration together.

Today we read, and think about, one of the favourite stories in the New Testament: the Feeding of the five thousand. We are reminded that, however needy and tired we may feel, God is ready to meet us with love and compassion. We may think that our resources are weak and inadequate, but if we are willing to offer and share what we have, we will find that God's provision is generous and abundant. Let us trust in the gifts of God's grace.

Let us take a moment of quietness, to think about how we are feeling at this time, to know the presence of God among us, and to open ourselves to his strength and his blessing.

Pause

Gathering Prayer:

Loving God,
you look deep inside us. You see not only our outer but our inner needs. Feed us today from your holy word, and we will be filled. Amen.

Call to Worship:

Gathered in separate places, yet united in Christian fellowship, we join our voices with the whole church, across the world, and across time.

Let us worship God:

Hymn: 160 Praise, my soul, the king of Heaven

First Prayer and Lord's Prayer:

Let us pray:

I thank you God, that I have lived
in this great world, and known its many joys:
the songs of birds, the strong, sweet scent of hay,
and cooling breezes in the secret dusk;
the flaming sunsets at the close of day,
hills, and the lovely, heather-covered moors;
music at night, and the moonlight on the sea,
the beat of waves upon the rocky shore
and wild white spray, flung high in ecstasy;
the faithful eyes of dogs, and treasured books,
the love of kin and fellowship of friends,
and all that makes life dear and beautiful.
I thank you, too, that there has come to me
a little sorrow, and, sometimes defeat,
a little heartache, and the loneliness
that comes with parting, and the words 'Good-bye'.
Dawn breaking after dreary hours of pain,
when I discovered that night's gloom must yield
and morning light break through to me again.
Because of these and other blessings poured

unasked upon my wondering head,
because I know that there is yet to come
an even richer and more glorious life,
and most of all, because your only Son
once sacrificed life's loveliness for me -
I thank you, God, that I have lived.¹

Lord God,
The eyes of all look to you,
and you give them their food in due season.
Day by day, may we grow in love and grace,
learning from you, following more nearly in the ways of Christ,
in whose words we pray:
*Our Father which 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 the Power and the Glory for ever Amen.*

Readings: Peter will read for us today:

Readings:

Psalms 145: 8-9; 14-21 (NRSVA)

The Lord is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.
The Lord is good to all, and his compassion is over all that he has made.

and at v. 14:

The Lord upholds all who are falling, and raises up all who are bowed down.
The eyes of all look to you, and you give them their food in due season.
You open your hand, satisfying the desire of every living thing.
The Lord is just in all his ways, and kind in all his doings.
The Lord is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth.
He fulfils the desire of all who fear him; he also hears their cry, and saves them.
The Lord watches over all who love him, but all the wicked he will destroy.
My mouth will speak the praise of the Lord,
and all flesh will bless his holy name for ever and ever.
Amen.

Matthew 14:13-21 (NIV): Jesus feeds the five thousand

When Jesus heard what had happened, he withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place. Hearing of this, the crowds followed him on foot from the towns. When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them and healed those who were ill.

As evening approached, the disciples came to him and said, 'This is a remote place, and it's already getting late. Send the crowds away, so that they can go to the villages and buy themselves some food.'

Jesus replied, 'They do not need to go away. You give them something to eat.'

'We have here only five loaves of bread and two fish,' they answered.

'Bring them here to me,' he said. And he told the people to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, he gave thanks and broke the

¹ *I thank you God, that I have lived* by Elizabeth, Countess of Craven, 1750-1828; (As cited in Bruce D. Prewer, 'Brief Prayers for Busy People', p. 213)

loaves. Then he gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the people. They all ate and were satisfied, and the disciples picked up twelve basketfuls of broken pieces that were left over. The number of those who ate was about five thousand men, besides women and children.

Amen. Thanks be to God.

Hymn 501 Take this moment, sign, and space

Message:

Our Gospel reading starts with the words, *"When Jesus heard what had happened, he withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place."*

The first part of the chapter tells us *"what had happened"*: the killing of John the Baptist. Remember that John had criticised Herod because Herod had divorced his own wife, against the Jewish law, and had married his brother's wife, also against the Law. The truth hurts, and both Herod and his new wife Herodias had a grudge against John. Then, at Herod's birthday party, Herodias used the seductive dancing of her daughter to manipulate Herod into a position where he ordered the beheading of John. In a grizzly scene, the head of John the Baptist was presented on a platter. Remember too that John was a cousin of Jesus, and that John's forthright preaching had prepared the way for Jesus. Recall how Jesus himself had been baptised by John in the waters of the Jordan River. We don't know to what extent family ties may have influenced them, but certainly there was a spiritual affinity between the two cousins.

How did Jesus react to all this news? Upset. He needed space, so he asked his disciples to take him away from the crowds. They boarded a fishing boat and sailed across a bay to a desert place. This sudden retreat shows us how devastated Jesus was by the death of his cousin. Physically, he needed the solitude of a lonely place. Emotionally he was plunged into a desert experience of the soul, a time of spiritual desolation when, even to him, God seemed far away. In times of grief and loss, there must be thousands of people who have cried out in the words of the Psalmist,

"My tears have been my food day and night, while people say to me continually, 'Where is your God?'" (Ps 43: 3).

Or as many grieving folk must have said to their pastor: "Why, when I need comfort so much, does God seem so deaf to my prayers?"

I think most Christian people will have known times in their spiritual life when it feels as if we have entered a desert: when things are going wrong, and God does seem very far away. For some, such desert experiences of the soul are few and far between. For others, they are frequent, and they may stretch into months or years. In most cases, they are not caused by lack of faith, nor by some kind of moral deficiency. They happen without apparent reason even to the most faithful and loving people. Many of the saints of the Church have testified to periods of spiritual aridity. Depression and anxiety are features of our times.

The Mental Health Foundation website tells me that a recent survey showed that almost six in ten adults in Scotland (58%) experienced anxiety that interfered with their daily lives in the previous two weeks, and that currently *"Across Scotland more than one million adults are experiencing levels of anxiety that is stopping them from living their lives, with many not speaking out and struggling to cope".²*

² <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/about-us/news/our-new-research-reveals-anxiety-gripping-scotland-many-people-struggle-cope#:~:text=%E2%80%9CAcross%20Scotland%20more%20than%20one,to%20protect%20our%20mental%20health>

I have been there. Maybe we've all been there. But Jesus has certainly been there too, and he understands. In the Garden of Gethsemane, and on the cross, Jesus felt forsaken, and there must have been other times when he felt spiritually desolate.

Out there in that remote place, after the murder of his cousin, Jesus was in a spiritual desert as well. But any time alone for prayer and reflection was cut short, because the crowds, anxious for more of his healing, his teaching, his parables, saw the direction the boat took, and guessed where it would make landfall. We don't know how long it took them, but either later the same day, or even on the next day, he found that the crowd had caught up with him. Then, *"When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them and healed those who were ill."* As he so often did, Jesus put his own needs aside and responded to theirs. Even if he was feeling low, his profound love found time to attend to them.

In any case, at the end of the day, the multitude was still with him, out there in the desert place. The disciples are concerned for Jesus. He had come here to be on his own. First kind thought: let's make him a bit of space. Second kind thought: these people have come a long way, and they must be getting tired and hungry, so, for their own sakes, best thing they can do is go home. *"Send the crowds away, so that they can go to the villages and buy themselves some food."* Notice, incidentally: the disciples don't mention their own needs.

No, says Jesus, *"They don't need to go away. You give them something to eat."* You can almost hear their response: "You must be joking! All we have for ourselves are five small loaves and two fish."

Matthew goes on to describe what must have been one of the most remarkable meals of all time. Jesus asked the people to sit down. He took the five loaves – they would be like our breadrolls – and the two fish, and prayed for God's blessing. He broke the loaves and gave them to his disciples to distribute to the hungry multitude.

Pause a moment and think about meal times. It's sad reflection of our present times that, for many families, the concept of sitting together around the table for a family meal has disappeared. In this age of take-away food, or sitting in front of the TV with a plate on your lap, or a meal gobbled in a fast-food outlet, the experiences of families gathering for a meal are much fewer. But I think of one family where the parents insisted, and got a big table, and they, and their children, soon came to realise the value of that shared table fellowship.

The Jews of Jesus's time loved their meal times. They still do. Meal times with Jesus would have been very happy times. Whether it was in the house of Mary and Martha, or dining with Zachaeas, or elsewhere, Jesus used meal times as an opportunity for breaking down the barriers, and opening people up to the inclusive love of God. Unlike the Pharisees and others with rigid ideas about meals and people who shared them, Jesus shared food with any who wanted to join him, or with any who wished to invite him to their table. And Jesus had an open table: open to all. Nowadays we emphasise this when we share the Lord's Supper.

Back to the story. That day, at dusk, Jesus played host to five thousand hungry people. He told them to sit down. He didn't ask whether or not they were all believers, or whether they had washed their hands; didn't insist on conformity to a set creed; excluded nobody, not even all those regarded as second-class citizens.

He said the blessing and broke the bread. He took the pitifully inadequate resources available, and, by his power, made them adequate for the job. Maybe he miraculously increased the quantity. Maybe some of the people there had brought food for themselves – if you were setting out on a long journey on foot, you'd grab a sandwich to take with you. Maybe Jesus shamed these folk into sharing with others. It doesn't matter. As the theologian Marcus Borg said, *"I don't know whether it all happened this way or not, but I know the story is true"*.

Set aside the details of whatever may, or may not, have happened in Palestine all those years ago. Ask yourselves, what is the God of 2023 saying to us in our time and place? Could he be telling us that, if we set our own small resources at his disposal, he will make them adequate for the job?

If our lesson from St. Matthew's Gospel tells us anything, it tells us above all that **God cares**. Despite his grief and shock over the death of John the Baptist, despite the knowledge that he himself might be the next victim of paranoid and deluded Herod, despite his exhaustion, *'When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them'*.

But notice: it was not Jesus himself who fed the crowd. He gave the food to the disciples to distribute. In our times, when Jesus is no longer with us in the flesh, if he wants something done, he needs to get someone to do it. He needs people through whom he can act and speak. He needs people to whom he can give, so that they can give to others. Our job is to be the people that Christ needs. He needs you and me.

The Church is the body of Christ. We are the Church, so, especially in these times of change within Church of Scotland, let us be the body of Christ, and let us be united in our prayers for our sisters and brothers all over our suffering world, where there is famine and flood and fire and drought and war and all the rest, and in every need.

The smallness of our resources is not a hindrance. Jesus is saying to us, "Come to me as you are, however ill-equipped; bring me what you have, however little, and I will use it greatly in my service." If we can offer only 50p to famine relief; if we can offer to the people of Ukraine or Sudan or Yemen or Africa or India only a word of prayer, if we have only a kind word and maybe a tear or two to share with the ill and grieving people in our own place, it doesn't matter. Little is always much in the hands of Christ. His power is far beyond anything that we can understand.

"My mouth will speak the praise of the Lord", says the Psalmist, "and all flesh will bless his holy name for ever and ever". (Ps 145: 21)

Amen to that. Soli Deo Gloria.

During the next hymn please bring the Offering to the Chancel

3rd (Offering) Hymn 717 O Christ, the healer, we have come

Dedication of Offering :

Gracious God,
in your love and in your grace, you have given the whole world to us,
for our pleasure, to our safe keeping,
everything we have and everything we could want, you have provided.
In dedication, in praise, and in worship, we offer back these tokens,
as a sign of our commitment to your Church and your mission,
and in thanks for your constant presence in our lives. Amen.

Prayers of Intercession

Let us pray:

Loving God, Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer,
we come before you in awe, searching and seeking, doubting and hoping,
trying to follow you, to understand you, to know you better.
Mindful of the abundance of your love, grace, and joy expressed in Jesus Christ,
we bring our prayers for other people.

We pray for our country, and for all those who call it home,

especially for people who have been forced to come here through violence, strife, economic hardship, or some other reason.
God of abundant, unimaginable love, help us to be a neighbour to all;
to see the humanity of our sisters and brothers before we see labels:
nationalities, skin colour, sexuality, or gender.

We pray for our world,
which continues to be ravaged by disease, by war, by all kinds of disaster,
while still struggling with age-old problems of poverty, isolation, and fear.
In particular, we pray for people facing famine in many places;
for all who know the pangs of hunger; who fear for what tomorrow brings;
those who go without to help others.

We pray for those who staff, support and use
foodbanks and charities which attempt to alleviate poverty.
Help us to remember that, even on his most difficult days,
Jesus gave all he had to nourish others,
and give us the boldness to follow his example in whatever way we can.

We pray for your Church, all over the world, and here, at home,
as we struggle to discern its place in this world, as we continue to seek to do your will
in these difficult times for this church, and for all churches.
Help all those who try to decide the way forward, for the good of your people,
the furtherance of your mission and the coming of your kingdom.

We pray for ourselves,
all those gathered here in this building, or linked indirectly with us via the internet,
that we may have our hearts and minds turned ever towards heaven,
turned towards our neighbour and towards you, abundant God.

At this time we bring to you those private prayers that we carry with us, for people and concerns.

Pause

God of love,
Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer.
Hear all our prayers, spoken and unspoken. In Jesus' name we ask. Amen.

Hymn 100: O Lord, Thou art my God and King (Psalm 145)

Choir: *'Lord, you have my heart'*

Afterthought: ***Wishing** by Ella Wheeler Wilcox³*

Do you wish the world were better?
Let me tell you what to do.
Set a watch upon your actions,
Keep them always straight and true.
Rid your mind of selfish motives,
Let your thoughts be clean and high.
You can make a little Eden
Of the sphere you occupy.

³ Ella Wheeler Wilcox: *Do you wish the world were better?*
in *Passion and Peace*, compiled by Diane Tucker, p.251

Do you wish the world were wiser?
Well, suppose you make a start,
By accumulating wisdom
In the scrapbook of your heart;
Do not waste one page on folly;
Live to learn, and learn to live
If you want to give men knowledge
You must get, ere you give.

Do you wish the world were happy?
Then remember day by day
Just to scatter seeds of kindness
As you pass along the way,
For the pleasures of the many
May be oftentimes traced to one,
As the hand that plants the acorn
Shelters armies from the sun.

Closing Hymn: 167 Guide me, O thou great Jehovah

Closing Words and Benediction:

Into a world of plenty, we go to speak charity,
Into a world of pain, we go to speak healing,
Into a world of hunger, we go to feed,
Into a world of need, we go to bring the good news and abundance of our Saviour.
Go now,
and the blessing of God almighty, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,
descend upon you, and rest with you today and forever more. Amen.

Doxology:

(Hy. 786) May the God of peace go with us as we travel from this place;
May the love of Jesus keep us firm in hope and full of grace.