

**ORPHIR and STENNESS CHURCH**  
**Sunday 27<sup>th</sup> August 2023; Proper 16A**  
**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 think about how we see Jesus, and about how Christians from differing backgrounds and with different ideas about God and faith can live and worship together as a community.

**Gathering Prayer:**

First, let us be still and quiet for a few moments, lay aside our worries and remind ourselves that we are in the presence of the living God.

*Pause*

Bless to me  
this body which is my friend,  
this mind which explores many things,  
this soul with which I know your love.

Bless to me  
my ears, that I may listen openly,  
my voice, that I may speak wisely,  
my face, that I may smile freely.

Bless to me  
these fingers with which I write,  
these arms with which I hug,  
these feet with which I move.

God of great faithfulness,  
bless all that is within me,  
and all who live around me,  
with the grace that knows no ending.

Amen! *(Bruce Prewer)*

**Call to Worship:**

Jesus asked, 'Who do people say that I am?'

We all say that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the Living God.

Let us join our voices with the church worldwide to worship together in his name.

***Let us worship God:***

**Hymn 159** Lord, for the years

**First Prayer and Lord's Prayer**

Whenever two or three gather in his name, Jesus is among them.

We gather now in his presence to renew our strength and confidence for our involvement with the world in our daily lives,  
remembering that we are joined, not only with our own church and community,  
but also with the worldwide family of God's people.

*We give thanks that we, who are many, are one body in Christ,  
and that, individually, we are members one of another.*

Through our continuing encounters with Jesus, may we find fresh insights, as did the

disciples at Caesarea Philippi.  
May we know him as Messiah, Son of the living God.

As summer turns towards autumn,  
as many enter, or return to, places of learning,  
or begin new jobs and new routines,  
we step aside from our own concerns and uncertainties and apprehensions,  
turning to our God of change and transitions, to the Lord of stability,  
on whose foundations we build our lives.  
May we anchor ourselves fast to him, the unchanging rock,  
finding anew his support in all the changes and turning points of our lives.

We give thanks for the assurance that we can always trust in him,  
who makes provision for our faults and failings, who surrounds us with his love,  
and sends us the renewal and encouragement we need.

We give thanks for Jesus and for his earthly life among his disciples,  
for his Gospel, which continues to teach and inspire us;  
for the knowledge, the confidence, that we can always lean on his teaching and promises,  
building upon what we are now,  
and working always towards all that we may become in God's plans for us.  
We offer all our prayers in the name of Jesus, and in his 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: Nicol will read for us today:**

**Romans 12: 1-8;** *Translation by William Barclay from The New Daily Study Bible*

Brothers, I call upon you, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies to him, a living, consecrated sacrifice, well-pleasing to God - for that is the only kind of worship which is truly spiritual. And do not shape your lives to meet the fleeting fashions of this world; but be transformed from it, by the renewal of your mind, until the very essence of your being is altered, so that, in your own life, you may prove that the will of God is good and well pleasing and perfect.

For, through the grace that has been given to me, I say to everyone among you, not to have a mind proud beyond that which a mind should be, but to have a mind directed towards wisdom, as God has given the measure of faith to each one of you. For just as we have many members in one body, but all the members do not have the same function, so, although we are many, we are one body in Christ, and we are all members of each other. Since, then, we have different gifts, according to the grace that has been given to us, let us use them in mutual service. If we have received the gift of prophecy, let us prophesy according to the proportion of faith that we have received. If we have received the gift of practical service, let us use it in service. If our gift is in teaching, let us use it in teaching. If it lies in exhortation, let us use it in exhortation. If we are called upon to share, let us do it with simple kindness. If we are called upon to supply leadership, let us do so with zeal. If the occasion arises when we must show mercy, let us do so with gracious cheerfulness.

**Gospel Reading: Matthew 16:13-20; (NRSV)**

***Peter's Declaration about Jesus:***

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, 'Who do people say that the Son of Man is?' And they said, 'Some say John the Baptist, but others

Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.’ He said to them, ‘But who do you say that I am?’ Simon Peter answered, ‘You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.’ And Jesus answered him, ‘Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.’ Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

*Amen,*

**Hymn 247** Moved by the Gospel, let us move with every gift and art.

### **Message:**

It has been said that Chapter 12 of Paul’s Letter to the Romans is so great an ethical statement that it should be set alongside Jesus’s Sermon on the Mount, because here Paul lays down the moral principles of the Christian Faith.<sup>1</sup> The early church was developing very rapidly, and there were people who opposed Paul and who had been spreading slanders and false accusations against him, so Paul was spelling out the details of his belief in order to win the support of the Roman Christians.

Paul is well aware that these people came from very different backgrounds and traditions. He has been dealing with the fact that the Jews, the chosen people of God, had rejected Christ, and, by doing that, they had opened up the way for the Gentiles to become Christians. That meant that he had to struggle with those Jews who had converted to Christianity and insisted that converts from outside had to be circumcised and obey at least some of the Law of Moses before they could become Christians: in other words that they had to become Jews before they could become Christians. Paul insists on a more liberal view, and he lays down the great principle that no one must ever do anything to hurt the conscience of someone who is weaker, or to make difficulties for someone whose beliefs are different from ours. Something we should bear in mind too.

If we read on into chapters 14 and 15, we find Paul telling us that some people take a narrower, stricter view of their religious obligations than others, and the same considerations apply. As William Barclay puts it: *“We must never do anything that makes it harder for someone else to be a Christian”*.<sup>2</sup>

One of Paul’s favourite thoughts is the idea of the Christian Church as a body. The various parts of the body don’t argue with one another, don’t envy one another or argue about their relative importance. Each part carries out its own function, however prominent or unseen that function may be. The Christian Church should be like that. Despite differences in backgrounds and beliefs and emphasis between the various branches of the developing church, they are all members of the same body. Each member has a job to do, and it is only when they all work together that the body that is the Church functions as it ought to do.

In some ways his situation is quite similar to the circumstances we have in our own Islands. In Orkney we have communities and Church of Scotland congregations with Christian people originally from a wide range of social and cultural, and religious and theological backgrounds - Baptist, Brethren, Anglican, Methodist, Roman Catholic, Pentecostal and more. In some places all these people work together very well for the work of Christ and for the greater good; in others less well – it depends on having an open mind and an open heart. Occasional arguments about various points of doctrine are

---

<sup>1</sup> William Barclay, Daily Study Bible; Romans, p.8

<sup>2</sup> Barclay, Ibid, 8,

healthy, and show that people are thinking about the implications of their faith.

If we accept Paul's assurance that *"we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another"*, if we can learn to use the gifts that we have been given, while still recognising that *"we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us"*, then we can grow into one body by the grace of God and the work of the Spirit. Paul reminds us that unity is possible even in diversity. Despite differences, we *can* all work together. We all have our God-given gifts, and we must use them in his service – but use them with sincerity and humility, so that everyone can keep a proper sense of his/her own place within God's scheme of things. Paul warns against passing judgement on others:

*"Why do you pass judgement on your brother or sister .... for we will all stand before the judgement seat of God"* (Rom. 14:10). Echoes here of Jesus' own words – *"Judge not that ye be not judged"*.

Paul's view is that, irrespective of their background, Jewish, or Gentile, or anything else, Christians should be able to live together in community. We **MUST** all work together. We need to get our priorities right.

Paul turns once again to practical advice to a Christian community with difficulties. There are differences in time and circumstances, but we can readily understand his concerns, and there are obvious lessons for us here in Orkney in 2023, as we face big changes in the Church of Scotland.

Behind it all is Paul's big concern that the developing Church – developing Christians – need to work together, recognising different abilities, different shades of belief and all the rest. Just as the members of the body don't argue with one another, don't envy one another, or squabble about their relative importance, neither should we. Just as each part of the body has its own special function, some prominent, some unseen, so each member of the Christian community has a task to do, and it is only when every one of them contributes the help of his or her own task that the body of the Church – which is the body of Christ – functions as it ought to do. The whole is far greater than the sum of its parts.

*"Be transformed by the renewing of your minds,"* says Paul – the Greek word might also be translated "mind-set" – allow yourself to be transformed in the way you think. Let each one of us look honestly at our own strengths and weaknesses and thank God that they balance one other out in the Christian community. Paul urges us to value the differences within the Church.

It is said that Christians are the most persecuted group in the contemporary world. In a whole list of countries where Muslims are in the majority - Iraq, Iran, Syria, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia, Yemen and many others – Christians face discrimination, persecution, repression, violence and in some cases death, mass murder or ethnic cleansing.

In 2021 the magazine *Christianity Today* estimated that, worldwide, every day, 13 Christians are killed because of their faith. Every day, 12 Christians are unjustly arrested or imprisoned, and another 5 are abducted. Every day, 12 churches or Christian buildings are attacked.

Christians in these places are not concerned about who is Protestant, or Catholic, Conservative or Progressive, or Baptist, or Brethren – or whatever. They are not arguing about minor differences in interpretation of Scripture, or about same-sex relationships, or women clergy, or subjects that no one is actually talking about. In the face of opposition that we cannot imagine, they are struggling to maintain their faith in Jesus Christ, crucified, dead and risen.

In our country we are unlikely to face death for our beliefs, but we face insidious opposition nonetheless. The New Atheism of Dawkins and his disciples and successors ridicules religion in general, and Christianity in particular.

What about the “outsiders” who see us as a bunch of hypocrites? People “out there” are quick to make disparaging remarks about the Church. “*Look at so-and-so*”, they say: “*If that’s what Christians are like, I want nothing to do with it.*”

### ***How would we measure up in the eyes of these people?***

Jesus said:

*“Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.”*

How brightly does our light shine?

Paul’s words have a direct bearing on the Church of Scotland at the present time. The Kirk is going through difficult times, exacerbated by the Covid Pandemic: diminishing congregations; church closures; a serious shortage of ministers and leaders, all at a time when a whole generation of people ‘out there’ are being invited to live a life of disbelief, even unbelief.

There will be changes; there will be big challenges ahead – but opportunities too. I hope – I believe – that people still want purpose and faith in their lives, and the Church, of whatever form or denomination, needs to be ready to help provide them.

I often quote Mahatma Gandhi:

*I like your Christ, I do not like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ.*

If the people ‘out there’ need the church at all, they need it to be like Jesus. We are the church. We are the Body of Christ. How do we measure up? *Are we like Jesus?*

Are we one body in Christ, and, individually, are we members one of another?

At the beginning of our reading from Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus asks the question: ‘*Who do you say that I am?*’

As one body, and with Simon Peter, can we answer:

*‘You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God?’*

Amen. Soli Deo Gloria.

May God bless to us this word preached in his name, and to his name be the glory and the praise.

*During the next hymn please bring the Offering to the Chancel*

**Hymn 645** I’m not ashamed to own my Lord

### **Dedication of Offering:**

Gracious God,

Each thing we have received came from you.

Each thing for which we hope will come from you.

Each thing we enjoy is of your giving.

Each thing for which we ask comes from your disposing.

We offer to you these tokens of our work and our prosperity.

Bless our gifts that they may be used to advance your work in the Church and in the world,

Through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

### **Prayers of Intercession**

God of all people and all places,  
we bring our prayers for your world and all its peoples.

We pray for all those divided from others by barriers of any kind:  
those who suffer discrimination because of their race, colour, their gender, sexuality,  
disability, or for any other reason.  
May we all play our part in bringing ourselves and others into the fullness of life that Jesus  
promised.

God of wisdom,  
we pray for your Church, in all its diversity.  
Recognising the gifts of all our members, and our liberty to differ on points of interpretation  
and procedure, may we yet be one body, united in our faith in the all-encompassing love of  
God as shown in Jesus Christ.

We pray for Christians suffering persecution for their faith, in India, in North Korea, China,  
the Middle East, and in many other places.  
May they know your strength and your protection.

Especially at this time of change in the Church in our country, and our County,  
wherever there has been discord and dispute among us,  
may we forgive, and be forgiven, as we learn and grow together.

God of compassion,  
we pray for all who need to know your care:  
all those who are ill, for those who treat them, and who nurse them,  
and for all who wait and worry.  
May they know your presence and your healing love.

We pray for people struggling to survive in the face of famine and natural disaster;  
for those who have lost homes and possessions through fire, or storm or flood;  
those affected by war, especially Ukraine and Sudan;  
for people risking their lives trying to move from one country to another;  
for compassion and understanding for refugees everywhere.

God of all,  
we think of victims of crime, and perpetrators of crime:  
among so many, we think of the parents and families of the babies killed in Manchester,  
of a deluded young woman committed to prison for life.

In the special quietness of this place,  
we open our hearts to your world, and all its people, and all their needs. We bring also our  
own personal and private worries, and concerns, and dreams,  
seeking your wisdom and support,  
open to your transforming grace in our thoughts and our actions.

*Pause*

Loving God,  
hear these, and all our prayers, through Jesus, our Friend, our Master, our Lord. Amen

**Hymn: 502** Take my life, Lord, let it be consecrated, glad and free.

**Choir:** *I need thee every hour.*

**Afterthought:**

Many people ask the question '*What do you believe in?*', but, for Christians, it is not *what* but *whom*. We believe in the living Christ. We believe that Jesus is the Son of God, our Saviour, and we seek a living relationship with him. We know, or know about, many Creeds, statements of faith – the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, the Statement of Christian Faith, approved by the General Assembly in 1992. Here is another: *Credo* by John Oxenham, a pen-name of William Dunkerley, who died in 1941.

**Credo**

Not what, but WHOM, I do believe,  
That, in my darkest hour of need,  
Hath comfort that no mortal creed  
To mortal man may give;--  
Not what, but WHOM!  
For Christ is more than all the creeds,  
And His full life of gentle deeds  
Shall all the creeds outlive.  
Not what I do believe, but WHOM!  
WHO walks beside me in the gloom?  
WHO shares the burden wearisome?  
WHO all the dim way doth illume,  
And bids me look beyond the tomb  
The larger life to live?--  
Not what I do believe,  
BUT WHOM!  
Not what,  
But WHOM!

**Closing Hymn: 497** Almighty Father of all things that be

**Closing Words and Benediction**

Go now and proclaim the Gospel,  
not just through words, but through deeds, through what you say,  
what you do, and what you are.  
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:**

May God's blessing surround you each day, As you trust Him and walk in his way,  
May his presence within guard and keep you from sin, Go in peace, go in joy, go in love.

.....