

ORPHIR and STENNESS CHURCH
Sunday 23rd. July 2023; Proper 11A
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 again the familiar story of the wheat and the weeds.

Gathering Words and Prayer:

Let us take a moment to be quiet and know the presence of God among us.

Pause

Where in your life do you need to know God's peace at this time? What is causing you anxiety or distress?

In the quiet and stillness, imagine God's love flowing through you, bringing peace, and healing, both for yourself and for others.

Pause

Amen.

Call to worship

Led by the Spirit, we set aside time to worship God.

We come as his children, heirs to his promises, witnesses to his love.

Let us worship God.

Hymn 129 The Lord is King! lift up your voice!

Opening Prayer and Lord's Prayer

Alpha and Omega, the first and the last,
our God is God of all that is, and all that shall ever be.
He is God of this present moment, yet he holds all of time in his hands;
his greatness is far beyond our imagining, and we come in worship.

For these few minutes, we step apart from the outside world, and from the concerns that occupy us, and we join with the Church worldwide,
offering praise and prayer, seeking reassurance and renewal,
seeking fresh energy to meet the times ahead in faith and confidence.

Once again, we have seen spring transformed into summer,
and we give thanks for the commonplace, wonderful, mystery of growth;
for flourishing plants, dipping towards harvest, in this garden of God's creating;
the birds nesting, young taking to flight for the first time;
the lambs and the calves; for children born, and growing to maturity.
We give thanks to the Living God for the gift of new life,
for hope renewed, purpose realised, progress made.

We give thanks for the mystery of the faith, the commitment that sustains us in our uncertainty;
for fears overcome, trust reaffirmed, commitments reasserted, and beliefs put into practice.
For all this, and more, we give thanks.

We acknowledge that, too often, our vision and our patience fail us;
we lose sight of the goal, and take the short-term view,
rather than holding on for the lasting things that benefit us all.

Trusting in the constant, faithful, forgiving, renewing grace of Christ, and knowing ourselves forgiven and set free, we ask that, through the Holy Spirit, there may be nurtured within us such growth as will bring honour to the God we seek to serve.
Through Christ our Lord, who taught us, when we pray, to say
*Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done in 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: Catherine will read for us today:

Rom 8: 12-25 (NRSVA)

Life in the Spirit:

So then, brothers and sisters, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh—for if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, 'Abba! Father!' it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ—if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.

Future Glory

I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

Gospel Reading: Matt. 13: 24-30 and 36-43:

The Parable of Weeds among the Wheat

[Jesus] put before them another parable: 'The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field; but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away. So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well. And the slaves of the householder came and said to him, "Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? Where, then, did these weeds come from?" He answered, "An enemy has done this." The slaves said to him, "Then do you want us to go and gather them?" But he replied, "No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. Let both of them grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn."

and at verse 36: Jesus Explains the Parable of the Weeds:

Then he left the crowds and went into the house. And his disciples approached him, saying, 'Explain to us the parable of the weeds of the field.' He answered, 'The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man; the field is the world, and the good seed are the children of the kingdom; the weeds are the children of the evil one, and the enemy who sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels. Just as the weeds are

collected and burned up with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, and they will throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Let anyone with ears listen!

Hymn 93 Let us with a gladsome mind praise the Lord

Message

Jesus told some good stories! He lived in an agricultural society, so he used farming metaphors to explain the mysterious nature of the kingdom of God.

Today's vivid story seems to follow on from the parable of the sower, another true to life scenario that would have immediately caught the attention of those first listeners. Jesus explains clearly what is happening in the story, but there are other lessons for those who have ears to listen.

Jesus tells us that the kingdom of heaven is like someone who has sowed good seed, yet an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat. Evil exists in the world, and may not be easily rooted out. As the householder wisely advises his slaves, it's not a good idea to pull out the weeds, for their roots are entangled with the wheat and pulling them out will damage the crop.

I'm told that the weeds Jesus is talking about are Bearded Darnel "false wheat", which, in the early stages is indistinguishable from wheat, but can be poisonous. The roots of the Darnel and the wheat become so tangled up together that it is very difficult to pull up the one without pulling up the other. Jesus explains that, at the end of the age, the angelic reapers will collect the weeds and throw them into the fire, while the wheat will be gathered into God's kingdom.

This is a story about good and evil, and, reading it again, I was reminded of a few things that we tend to forget.

We know that, in the world, there is a force for good. In human behaviour it exists in a natural tendency to help other people, to treat others as we would like them to treat us. This has been called the 'Moral Law' – an altruistic impulse that moves human beings to do the "right" things, to help other people, even if we receive nothing in return, maybe even if we risk injury, or even death, to do it. There are many examples of how, in an emergency, a person has acted instinctively to help another, without taking the time to consider why. It is a universal power that exists through all nations, and is hard to define. Some people simply call it love – love in the Christian sense of the Greek word *agape* that we understand as Christian Love: a divine energy that shows itself also in compassion, in caring, in non-violence, in forgiveness, in peace.

It is the power of God, and it exists in many religions. For Christians, it is the Power of Jesus Christ: the still, small voice that speaks to us in every encounter, in every relationship, from every other being; the voice that urges us to understand without criticising, or passing judgement – that urges us to *be Christ for somebody else*. However, we are left to choose whether or not to act for the good.

Here is the unpleasant truth that we cannot ignore: there is also in the world a force for evil, a hostile power, an "enemy" whose malicious work spreads throughout the world. Throughout the ages people have sensed that, in the universe, there is a power which is in opposition to good and to God, a force that makes people turn from what they know is right and proper, and act in a way that may benefit themselves at the expense of others. We don't have to look far for examples. TV bulletins seem full of stabbings and crimes of violence; sexual crimes; the obscenity of child abuse at the hands of people who are

supposed to be caring for them – sports clubs, children’s homes, even churches. Figures for crime continue to increase.¹

Worldwide, we hear continuing stories of war, in Ukraine, and Sudan, Syria, Yemen, and many other places; terrorism, tyranny, oppression, atrocities, war crimes. It has become unfashionable to talk about the devil, but, just as there is a force for good, call *it what you like, there is a force for evil in the world: **a force for good, and a force for evil.***

When Jesus points out that it can be very hard to tell the wheat from the weeds, he is warning us that it is very hard to tell those who are on the side of God from those who are not. Human relationships have plenty of examples of trusted employees and members of society who are shown to have an unsavoury side, or worse. Jimmy Saville and Rolf Harris are now history, but, in their lives, they were popular celebrities. Now they are remembered, not for the good they may have done, but as the tip of a huge iceberg of sexual abuse of both children and adults. We keep hearing about people in the public eye who abuse their position for personal gain; of “Institutional racism”.

Some people appear to be good, and may in fact be bad. I guess we could all tell stories about people we liked and trusted, who let us down, but of course the reverse is also true: we remember others who have pleasantly surprised us. It’s easy to classify people and label them good or bad, without knowing all the facts. I can think, with shame, of times when I was over-ready to write off somebody because of some prejudice: times when I underestimated people because of their appearance, or the way they dressed, or the way they spoke. Maybe you’ve done the same.

Jesus warns us against being too quick with our judgements. If the reapers had had their way, they would have tried to tear up the weeds - and some of the wheat as well, like a careless gardener trampling new growth in attempt to get at the weeds. No. Judgement had to wait until the harvest came.

It’s also unfashionable to talk about *the end of the age*, and about judgement. But here is Jesus doing just that: warning about what will happen to “*all causes of sin and all evildoers.*” (v. 41). In the end, we will be judged, not by one single act, good or bad, but by our whole lives. Judgement cannot come until the end. The teaching of the New Testament tells us repeatedly that it is possible to turn from our wrongdoing, to repent, and, by the grace of God, to redeem ourselves, and to atone for all that went before by living a better life. Or we can live an honourable life, and in the end, wreck it by a sudden collapse into sin. No one who sees only part of the picture can judge the whole, and nobody sees the whole except God.

This parable teaches us that judgement *does come* in the end. Maybe we don’t like to think about it, but here Jesus says quite clearly that there will be a time of reckoning. We may escape the consequences of our sin in this life, but what of the life to come? It may be that, in this life, trying to be good brings us no benefit, but there is to be a new world to redress the balance of the old.

Sure, Paul tells us that we are saved by grace, not by works (Eph. 2: 8-9), but James insists that faith without works is dead. (James 2: 26)

We are saved *by* grace *for* works; not *by* good works, but *for* good works.

¹ <https://www.gov.scot/news/recorded-crime-in-scotland-year-ending-december-2022/#:~:text=In%20the%20year%20ending%20December%202022%3A,from%2066%2C082%20to%2069%2C117%20crimes>
In Scotland, in the year ending December 2022, non-sexual crimes of violence were 5% higher than in the previous year, and 5% higher compared to the year ending December 2018, increasing overall from nearly 66,000 to over 69,000 crimes. Sexual crimes rose to 14,640 crimes, 10% higher than December 2018.

OK. So what? Is this all “pie in the sky when we die”? The heaven and hell thing all over again? I don’t know. But it is interesting to reflect that Jesus said: (John 12: 32):

“When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all people to myself.” **All.**

And Paul writes (1 Cor 15: 22): “For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive.” **All.**

In 1 Timothy, Chapter 2:4, we read that God our Saviour ‘desires *everyone* to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth’ and about Christ Jesus ‘who gave himself a ransom for all’. (1 Tim 2: 6) **All.**

This parable tells us that, eventually, God will triumph over evil, and that all things will be subject to God: that, in the end, nothing and nobody can remain outside the love of God. Otherwise - God will have failed!

Challenging stuff here. We cannot know how it is all to be accomplished, but we do know that it is not possible to set limits to the grace of God, in this world or the next. An interesting thought for you to ponder.

The bottom line? Our Gospel reading gives us some clear messages.

There is a power for good in this world, but there is also a hostile power, seeking and waiting to destroy the good seed. We must be always on our guard.

It can be hard to distinguish those who are in the kingdom from those who are not. We are much too quick to label people as good or bad without knowing all the facts. Just as the farmer allowed the weeds to grow alongside the wheat, so we are called to live without judging other people.

God alone can see all of a person, and all of that person’s life.

God alone can weigh up the good and the bad.

It is God alone who can judge. *Judge not, that ye be not judged.*

At its most basic, this parable is two things:

a warning not to judge other people at all;

and a warning, that in the end, there will come the judgement of God.

How we are to respond is left to each one of us.

Amen. Soli Deo Gloria.

During the next hymn please bring the Offering to the Chancel

3rd (Offering) Hymn 240 God in his love for us lent us this planet

Dedication of Offering:

Loving, gracious God,

we ask that you will receive the gifts we offer, not only our money, but our very selves;

take and use them, and us, for your purposes in this church, this community and beyond.

In Jesus’ name, Amen.

Prayers of Intercession

NB Responses:

L: *God of justice and mercy,*

All: *hear our prayer.*

Living God, made known to us in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, and through the power of the Holy Spirit, we give thanks for the life you have given to each one of us, each of us uniquely created in your image.

We thank you for the opportunity to explore the wondrous universe you have created for us.

We pray for your Church, in the world, in Scotland, and in Orkney,
especially in these times of change.

Guide those who have to make difficult decisions; help us all to look on change with open
minds.

L: God of justice and mercy,

All: hear our prayer.

Lord, despite the advances of the Age of Enlightenment, despite all the other ages past,
humanity has still not yet accepted the concept of equal rights for all, irrespective of race,
colour, gender orientation, or any other criteria.

Maybe we ourselves have some difficulties here.

We pray for all who are marginalised because of perceived differences;

we pray for acceptance and equality for all.

L: God of justice and mercy,

All: hear our prayer.

We pray for all who suffer at the hands of humanity:

all who face the horror of abuse and degradation;

those who are trafficked and forced to do terrible and degrading things;

people who are forced into marriages not of their own choosing,

those forced to have children and to care for families.

We pray for all who are denied access to education or healthcare,

those struggling to balance work with family life, struggling to survive.

L: God of justice and mercy,

All: hear our prayer.

May we learn from the mistakes and errors of the past,

and find ways to oppose inequality and injustice;

may we play our part, however small, in making the world a fairer and safer place for all.

We pray for people who continue to suffer because of war and oppression of any kind,

thinking especially of Ukraine and Sudan, Afghanistan; Iran;

who suffer because of famine, flood, or natural catastrophe of any kind.

L: God of justice and mercy,

All: hear our prayer.

We pray for people who are ill, in pain, or suffering, or worried,

or grieving for one who has gone.

In a moment of quiet, we bring to you at this time our own personal prayers....

Pause

L: God of justice and mercy,

All: hear our prayer.

We bring all our prayers in the name of Jesus. Amen.

4th. Hymn 343 The reign of God, like farmer's field (T. Crediton 277)

Choir: Highland Cathedral

Afterthought

A few weeks ago I spoke to you about coincidences, and especially about a series of
coincidences that involved my grand-daughter and her husband. I was reminded later of
another series of coincidences that happened a long time ago.

The background: after I graduated as a vet in 1965, I worked for a year at Glasgow University Vet School. During that time, I met a bacteriologist, a Hungarian vet called Laszlo Nagy. He was a bit older than I, and I didn't know him well, but he was pleasant and helpful in his department. At the end of my year at Glasgow, I accepted the offer of a 2-year contract to work as a vet in what is now the Faculty of Veterinary Medicine of the University of Nairobi, Kenya. When I went to Kenya in 1966, I found that there were a lot of the Glasgow teaching staff there, including Laszlo.

Move on a year or so. I had met Alison over a cow (a story for another day), and we became good friends. One day we went down into the centre of the City of Nairobi, about eight miles away. It was very busy, with people of many nationalities bustling around, and, as we passed one of the big hotels, which was a favourite rendezvous place if you were arranging to meet someone, we saw a little old lady, with a small suitcase, standing against the wall, crying. We approached her and asked her if we could help. Between her sobs, she replied in a torrent of a language that we did not understand. But: in among it, the words, "Laszlo Nagy".

Alison waited with the lady, while I went to the public telephone in the hotel (long before mobile phones). I rang the vet department and asked to speak to Laszlo. Fortunately, he was in his office, and I was able explain what had happened. He understood right away: this was his mother, come on a visit, but her flight was not expected to arrive for another 2-3 hours. – there must have been some change. He would come right away. I explained by sign-language to the lady that he was coming immediately, and that we would wait with her until he came. That didn't take long: he must have driven quite fast, and within another few minutes, problem solved, mother and son off to Laszlo's home.

Coincidences. That particular day. That particular time. That exact spot in that very busy city centre, thousands of miles from our homes. Of all the people coming and going, I was one of the very few people in the country who knew that lady's son and how to contact him. And he was in his office when I rang.

Question: What do you think would be the mathematical chances of all these factors coming together? Any guesses?

I mentioned to you these few weeks ago the saying that God moves in a mysterious way. Maybe here again we have just a chain of coincidences. But, as Lord George MacLeod, the founder of the Iona Community once said, *"If you think that was coincidence, I wish you a very boring life"*.

Closing Hymn 233 Come, ye thankful people, come

Closing Words and Benediction

Rejoice that, in your own places and your own time, you join with the people of God everywhere, growing stronger through the blessing of his presence.

Keep safe, and walk in the ways of Christ,

and the blessing of God almighty, Father, Son, 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.

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