

ORPHIR and STENNESS CHURCH
Service Sunday 21st May 2023, Easter 7A
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.

Introduction:

Today we think about the end of Jesus's earthly ministry, and his prayers for his disciples, and we remember that we, too, are included in these prayers.

Gathering Words and Prayer

We pause for a few moments to remember that we are in the presence of God ...
Let us take a moment to be quiet and know the presence of God among us.

Pause

Prayer:

Lord Jesus, by your ascension you left our world, but you did not abandon us.
You promised the Spirit – who comes to us and makes a home within us,
reminds us of you, guides and protects us, surrounds us with your love.
Help us to be aware of your presence in our worship today. Amen.

Call to Worship:

Come, for the risen Lord invites you. Come, for the Holy Spirit seeks you.
Come, for the Creator calls you.

Let us worship God:

Hymn: 457 All hail the power of Jesus' name

Prayer and Lord's Prayer

Let us pray:

Our God is above and beyond us, and yet all around us and within us,
ready to receive us, to embrace us and enfold us.
How can we not adore him?
His being, his power, his love, his guidance, are far beyond our understanding,
yet in belief, in faith, sometimes in desperation, we reach out to him.

Lord Jesus Christ,
you ascended beyond our seeing, beyond our understanding,
yet you did not leave your disciples, and we know that you do not leave us:
we know that you are forever before us, and behind us, ever within us, and around us,
urging us on to a wider vision.

You listen, Lord,
to our sorrows and our sadness,
to our faltering words of half-formed understanding of your way, your truth and your life;
you hear our confessions, our yearnings, and our pleadings when we acknowledge
times when we have failed you, failed others, and failed ourselves.
In this moment we offer you our failings and our faults, knowing that you hear and lift the
burden from us.
We thank you, God,

that your wisdom is so far beyond our imagining,
for so often we seem to make a mess of things.
We look for the easy ways, but you gently divert our vision to see
what *you* would have us see.

We give thanks that your Word remains strong, steadfast and secure;
that your Scriptures tell your story through the ages,
stories of prophets and teachers of old,
helping us to recognise prophets of our own time who reveal your being to us.

We give thanks that today and every day,
you are there, and here, and everywhere for us.
Renew us and encourage us, so that, in this time and place
we may follow more closely in the example of Jesus Christ, your Son,
whom we seek to serve, and in whose name, and in whose words we pray saying:
*.....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: Kathryn will read for us:

Acts 1: 6-14: The Ascension of Jesus

So when they had come together, they asked him, 'Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?' He replied, 'It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.' When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. While he was going and they were gazing up towards heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. They said, 'Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up towards heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.'

Matthias Chosen to Replace Judas

Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a sabbath day's journey away. When they had entered the city, they went to the room upstairs where they were staying, Peter, and John, and James, and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers. *Amen.*

John 17:1-11 and 20-21:

New Revised Standard Version, Anglicised

Jesus Prays for His Disciples

After Jesus had spoken these words, he looked up to heaven and said, 'Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you, since you have given him authority over all people, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do. So now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed.

'I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; for the words that you gave to me I have given to them, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you; and they have

believed that you sent me. I am asking on their behalf; I am not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those whom you gave me, because they are yours. All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them. And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one.

And at verse 20:

'I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.

Amen. Thanks be to God.

Hymn: 438 The Head That Once Was Crowned with Thorns

Message:

Important things – exciting things - in our two readings today; quite serious stuff. In Acts, a warning: it is not for us to know certain things – the *'the times or periods that Father has set by his own authority'*.

In the past I have spoken about people who try to predict the end of the world, and the second coming. Jesus told us it is not for us to know. Then the promise of the Holy Spirit; and the promise that the disciples, and we, are to be Christ's witnesses everywhere, 'to the ends of the earth'. Then the mysterious story of the Ascension.

But for me, the most important message today is from John's gospel, which tell us that Jesus prayed – *and prays* – for his disciples, *and for us*.

Jesus prays for the disciples – and for us! (v. 20)

A peedie bit of theology.

The death, resurrection, and exaltation of Jesus are the most important events in, and a foundation of, the Christian faith. In the light of the stories about his resurrection, ascension, and exaltation, early followers of Jesus believed that God had vindicated Jesus after his death. They believed that Jesus was raised as first of the dead, taken into Heaven, and exalted, taking his seat at the right hand of God in Heaven – we find in the Apostles' Creed: *"He ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of God the Father almighty"*.

The view of the cosmos that we find in the New Testament reflects the beliefs, the state of knowledge, of these times. which envisioned a three-part cosmos with the heavens above, an Earth centred on Jerusalem in the middle, and the underworld below it. Heaven was separated from the Earth by the visible sky, which they thought of as solid inverted bowl where God's palace sat on pillars in the celestial sea. Humans, even the wisest people, looking up from Earth, saw the sky as the floor of Heaven. That's why they thought of the departure of Jesus as being 'taken up'.

In our times, trying to take these stories literally presents a big problem, because we know so much more about space. Some theologians describe the Ascension as a puzzle, or even an embarrassment for an age that no longer thinks of a physical Heaven located just above the Earth. Nowadays, in the age of powerful telescopes and space exploration, we know that the nearest star to us is our own sun, 93 million miles away; that the Sun's nearest neighbour, the triple-star Alpha Centauri, is 4.3 *light-years* away. That's about 25 trillion miles away from Earth – nearly 300,000 times the distance from the Earth to the sun. Astronomers tell us that our galaxy, the Milky Way, contains half-a-trillion stars. Its centre is about 26,000 light-years from Earth, it is 100,000 light years across, and it is only one of 170 billion galaxies.

I could go on ... the point is that we don't -can't -think of heaven as some local place up in the sky, but rather as a state of blessedness when we will be forever with God. I think of heaven, not as a place, but as a condition, where we are absorbed into the unimaginable immensity of the God who is all around us, the God in whom we live and move and have our being – and in the light of the mind-numbing immensity of the cosmos, I think that is by no means impossible.

All this is mind-boggling stuff, and we need to remember that the Bible isn't concerned with the question about 'how' something happened, but rather 'why' something has happened.

We don't need to get bogged down with *how* Jesus ascended to heaven. Instead, we need to concentrate upon the question of why Luke (who wrote Acts) thought it was vital to record that the earthly life of the risen Jesus came to an end.

Luke insists that the *resurrection* was a reality, not some sort of transcendent vision: that the disciples actually witnessed Jesus eating, drinking, walking and talking - that he was truly alive. In the same way, Luke wants to tell the world that, after the resurrection appearances, Jesus's life on earth came to a definite end, and he returned to the Father. At the end of Luke's story Jesus ascends to heaven, and two heavenly witnesses confirm that his life on earth for now is over.

Remember that there were similar events in the Old Testament, such as Elijah being taken up to God and his power being transferred to Elisha. It's not for us to worry about the details. It's not so much "how" it happened as "why" it happened. It's the end of a chapter. Luke makes sure that Jesus is not left to one particular time, or place, in human history. The story of the ascension broadens a specific story about Jesus Christ into a universal affirmation that God's glorious work in the resurrection *goes beyond time and place*. It means that we, in our time and place, in the here and now, can know the Risen Lord Jesus Christ.

Only Luke, who wrote both Luke and Acts, records any details of Jesus's ascension. Even so he spends little time on the ascension itself, before reminding the disciples that *there was work to be done here on earth*.

The disciples get a bit of a telling off from the angels too: why are they standing there looking to heaven? Their work is here on earth - that has been made clear to them. They have to take up Christ's work of spreading the Good News all over the world, the Good News that through Jesus Christ comes the blessing of eternal life.

For me, the most important part of today's readings is John's account of Jesus's prayer at the completion of his earthly work. That's why I added verse 20 and 21 to the Lectionary reading for today. Jesus saw the Cross as the climax of his life: the completion of his mission, and the way to the glory of eternity. In his prayer to God his Father, Jesus says:
"I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do".

The gospel story makes it quite clear that Jesus could have escaped the cross, but, if he had done that, if he'd stopped short of the cross, he would have been leaving his task uncompleted. It would have been like saying that God's love went only thus far, but no further. By going to the Cross, Jesus demonstrated that there was nothing that the love of God was not prepared to do and suffer for humanity: there is literally no limit to the love of God. As Paul says,
Nothing in all creation can separate us from God's love for us in Christ Jesus our Lord.

More than that, by his resurrection, Jesus demonstrated that the cross was not the end. In his prayer he spells out what he means by “eternal life.”

Notice carefully what he says in his prayer for the disciples:

This is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.” **Jesus’s own definition of eternal life.**

Eternal life is not some add-on after we die, a reward for ‘good’ behaviour. Rather, *it is eternal life to know God and to know Jesus Christ whom he has sent.* The Greek word used here for *eternal* has not so much to do with the duration of life as with the *quality* of life. To know eternal life is to experience *in the here and now* something of the joy, the blessing, the peace of knowing God as the one true God, and knowing that Jesus Christ is the One whom God sent.

Lastly notice verse 20 - 21:

*‘I ask not only on behalf of these, [the Disciples] but also on behalf of **those who will believe in me through their word**, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.*

Jesus’s prayers sweep into the distant future. He prays for people who, in distant lands and far-off ages, will enter the Christian faith.’ That includes us. In his prayers, Jesus is talking about you. And me. “*Those who believe in me through their word*”, that is, through the word of his followers.

His followers announced the message, and those who heard them passed it on – and on. That means that there are responsibilities for us. Somebody said that the church is never more than one generation away from extinction: all it would take is for one generation *not* to hand on the word’.

Jesus’s prayer for us. *Jesus prayed for us!*

Remember that when you are having a bad day;
when you face stress and difficulties and problems of any kind;
when you think the world’s comin doon about your lugs.

Remember too our duty to pass on the word.

Amen *Soli Deo Gloria.*

During the next hymn please bring the Offering to the Chancel

Hymn (Offering) 622 We sing a love

Dedication of Offering:

God of love,
all that we have comes from you; it is freely given for us to enjoy responsibly.
We present our offerings before you.
Take and receive them to be used in building your kin-dom
here and now. Amen. (*from 'Spill the Beans'*)

Prayers of Intercession

Let us pray:

We bring before God our concerns for our world.

In these times of change we pray for our new King and Queen,
for leaders and members of government in Westminster and Edinburgh,
that all may act with integrity, wisdom and compassion, and for the benefit of all people.
In Orkney we remember the tragic loss of two young lives in recent weeks, and a diver
missing in Scapa Flow.

Loving God,
Especially in these times of great change, guide our activities in the church,
in the world, and in our own place.
Be with the Church of Scotland, meeting this week in General Assembly;
guide and direct all those there, and joining via the internet,
as they struggle with difficult problems and difficult decisions.
Be with your church here in Orkney, as we also face change,
that we may find ways to grow; ways to look forward, and not back,
ways serve our communities, always in your name, for your purposes,
and to your greater glory.
Amidst the splendour and pomp and grandeur of great occasions,
turn our thoughts to those who struggle to survive,
to places where innocent people suffer and die.

Where there is war we pray for peace; peace in Ukraine; peace in Sudan;
in Syria, and Palestine, and Yemen and many other places.
Where there is illness, bring health;
where young children die from diseases that can be easily prevented and treated,
where medical care is stretched very thin, we pray that resources may be made available.

Where there is despair, O Lord, we pray for hope.
We hold before you people who suffer because of natural disasters:
hurricane; floods, and droughts, remembering Malawi;
earthquakes, remembering Turkey and Syria.

We hold in your love those whom we love:
those who need support, and guidance. and direction;
those who are sick; those who are sorrowful;
remembering the families of the two young people who lost their lives very recently;
remembering the family of a diver missing in the Flow or the Firth.

In quietness we bring to you those we carry in our hearts today.
Pause

Jesus said:
'Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.
Cast all your anxiety on Jesus, because he cares for you.'

We offer all these our prayers in his name. Amen.

Hymn: 436 Christ Triumphant (Tune Mission Praise 77)

Choir: *'All will be well.'*

Afterthought:

Glimpses Of Glory: *When God Breaks Through:*

Have you ever had an experience, a magic moment, when time seemed to stand still? When things seemed crystal clear? When you felt overwhelmed by something beyond yourself? I have. I suspect almost everyone has, sometime.

Rudolf Otto, a German theologian, coined a word to describe that kind of experience. He called it "*numinous*," meaning that it goes beyond anything we can rationally describe. Without knowing why, we know that the moment is filled with awe, is overwhelming, is urgent, and is fascinating. We are drawn into it.

The trouble is that we can't explain it. In our culture, being moved to tears seems to be weakness, and being moved to joy like lunacy. So we usually pretend that nothing really happened. We say it was just imagination, just emotion.

But it did happen. And it was real.

Maybe we can't explain these moments. But if we can accept them, if we can admit that they could be God cracking open the crust that forms on our daily routines, we may start to see, hear, and feel the presence of an everyday God.

- *From 'Seasons of the Spirit'.*

These are the same experiences as we have in 'thin places'.

Closing Hymn 522 The Church is wherever God's people are praising

Closing Words and Benediction:

You, O God, are the stronghold of our lives and we are not afraid,
though storms of change may rage, we remain centred in your love,
so send us from this time of worship with strength and courage,
that we might continue to witness to your love in new ways
with renewed hope, revitalised energy, and refreshed zeal.

Now may the peace of God, which is beyond all understanding,
guard your hearts and your thoughts in Christ Jesus;
and may the blessing of God almighty,
the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit,
be with you, and remain with you, now and always. Amen.

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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.

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