

ORPHIR and STENNESS CHURCH
Sunday 29th October 2023; Proper 25A
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.

Gathering words:

Jesus tells us that the greatest commandment is the law of love. What he asks us to do seems simple: to love God and love one another. That is the challenge that Jesus gives us.

Let us first take a few moments to be quiet. Stop whatever you are doing.

Pause

You might want to let your eyes rest on something: the sky; the flowers; your hands; the cross

Pause

Listen to your breathing.

Pause

Become aware...

that God is present with you;

right here; right now.

Unhurried. Just present.

Pause

Ask God to shed light on this time of reflection.

Pause

Where have you noticed God with you this week?

Stay with those pictures. Enjoy them again. Give thanks for them.

Pause

Were there times when you struggled? Recall those times; bring them to the intensely listening ear of God. Let God know how you feel,

Pause

Look ahead to the coming days.

Is there something you will need?

Ask God; simply ... ask.

Pause

Bring your prayer to a gentle close.

Glory be to God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, as it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be. Amen..

Call to Worship: *Let us worship God:*

Hymn 132 Immortal, invisible

Opening Prayer and Lord's Prayer: *Let us pray:*

From the bustle of our everyday lives, we bring ourselves to a time of quietness in

this familiar place, a place of peace and of safety.

In these times of uncertainty and change, we seek to cast off the cares of the world,
and, for a time, reflect on the things of God,
so that our spiritual batteries may be recharged,
our direction refocused, our energy renewed.
We let go of all that hampers us; we think quietly about those with whom we share this
time, and about those we carry in our hearts.

We seek the renewing grace of God, that, in turn, we may bring renewal to others.

Acknowledging that often we get things wrong, we reflect on things done,
and things left undone, things we might have managed better.
May we know ourselves pardoned, renewed, and released
to share afresh in the eternal love of God.

We come in thanksgiving for the kind and caring people in the world:
people whose love for God and for their neighbours radiates from their lives;
for the comfort of voice and touch; the encouraging smile, the listening ear,
for quiet reassurance and understanding; for patience and perseverance extended to us.

We give thanks to God, who has touched the lives of these people,
enabling them, in turn, to touch our lives,
to strengthen us in our faith and enrich our knowledge of him.
May we, in turn treat others with the same kindness and concern.
We bring our prayers in the name of Jesus, and we pray as he has taught us:
*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.*

Bible Readings: Tracy will read for us today

1 Thessalonians 2:1-12: (NRSVA): *Paul's Ministry in Thessalonica*

You yourselves know, brothers and sisters, that our coming to you was not in vain, but though we had already suffered and been shamefully maltreated at Philippi, as you know, we had courage in our God to declare to you the gospel of God in spite of great opposition. For our appeal does not spring from deceit or impure motives or trickery, but just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the message of the gospel, even so we speak, not to please mortals, but to please God who tests our hearts. As you know and as God is our witness, we never came with words of flattery or with a pretext for greed; nor did we seek praise from mortals, whether from you or from others, though we might have made demands as apostles of Christ. But we were gentle among you, like a nurse tenderly caring for her own children. So deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you have become very dear to us.

You remember our labour and toil, brothers and sisters; we worked night and day, so that we might not burden any of you while we proclaimed to you the gospel of God. You are witnesses, and God also, how pure, upright, and blameless our conduct was towards you believers. As you know, we dealt with each one of you like a father with his children, urging and encouraging you and pleading that you should lead a life worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory. *Amen.*

Gospel Reading: Matt. 22: 34-46; (NRSVA): *The Greatest Commandment*

When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. 'Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?' He said to him, "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.'" This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: "You shall love your neighbour as yourself." On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.'

The Question about David's Son

Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them this question: 'What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?' They said to him, 'The son of David.' He said to them, 'How is it then that David by the Spirit calls him Lord, saying,

"The Lord said to my Lord,

'Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet'?"

If David thus calls him Lord, how can he be his son?' No one was able to give him an answer, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions.

Amen. Hear what the spirit is saying to the Church.

Hymn 198 Let us build a house

Message:

Today the clocks went back one hour to GMT – so maybe you've had an extra hour in bed! Next week begins the countdown to Advent, and to Christmas.

This has been a strange year, and a bit worrying, with changes in the Church of Scotland, closure of buildings, linkage of presbyteries and all the rest. Maybe we've paid less attention than usual to the changing seasons. Now, as the grimleens get earlier, and the long light summer nights days fade into distant memory, we get ready to batten down any hatches not already battened down, and prepare for winter.

In these puzzling times, we may well wonder what God is saying to us. Today's readings from Thessalonians and from Matthew prompt us to think about what's important to us. Even since Covid, there have been lots of changes in our world: wars in many places, natural disasters of many kinds; changes too in the ways we interact with other people, and we need to be reminded of something or someone permanent to hang on to. Today's readings are about relationships with God, and with other people, and we think about what Jesus says about the important things in life.

I'm told that the Law of Moses contains 613 commandments, so when that lawyer asked which was the greatest out of all the 613, many people might have been glad of the answer Jesus gave. In effect, Jesus said that 1500 years of Scripture, and something like 600,000 words, can be summarised in just two verses that give the heart of the message.

So we need to pay attention:

"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: "You shall love your neighbour as yourself."

The next verse doesn't quite mean that these two commands are *all* you need – but it does claim that everything in the Jewish Law leads to these two. God still calls *us* to shape our lives by these two commands – simple to read aloud, without even taking a breath, but utterly absorbing to live out, and claiming every breath we take.

Matthew describes another in a series of incidents where the Jewish religious leaders are trying to make trouble for Jesus. Each time, he has got the better of them. Here, he simply quotes from the *Shema*, which every good Jew recites twice a day. We know it as the Great Commandment:

Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength. (Deut. 6:5).

Jesus adds the words, "*with all your mind*", to remind us that real love for God involves not only our emotions, but also our thinking, our planning, and our actions:

"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind."

And: *"You shall love your neighbour as yourself."*

The famous Jewish Rabbi, Hillel, who lived about the same time as Jesus, was asked to sum up the entire Torah. He said:

"That which is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow. That is the whole Torah: the rest is the explanation; go and learn."

This is a *negative* form of the Golden Rule. Earlier in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus turns it round the other way:

*"In everything, **do** to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets". (Matt. 7:12, NRSV)*

*Instead of advice to refrain from doing to others something hateful to yourself, a **positive instruction to go out and do good**.*

St. Augustine said, "Love God and do as you please."

Love. The Greek language has several different words for love. The word used here is "*agapē*", maybe better translated as **loving-kindness**. This word expresses more than an emotion. It is not a passive word: instead it is an active response to God, an action expressed in kindness, and mercy, and patience and generosity. It's something we *do*.

God's love is active. God chose to love Israel above all nations and to bring his love through this chosen people. To love God with all our heart, and soul, and mind is to *choose to respond* to God even as God chooses to love us. It's not about feelings and emotions: Biblical love - Christian love - is something we **choose to do**, not a feeling.

When we look at the Great Commandment, we have to think of love in this Biblical sense. Otherwise, if we think of love as purely an emotion, then to love God with all our heart, mind, and soul seems very difficult.

Sometimes God seems distant, unknown, unknowable.

We can't look into God's eyes, or wrap our arms around the Spirit.

We can't even see the face of Jesus – maybe, if we could, we might experience a profound feeling of love. Yet we are commanded to love God.

It's even harder to love our neighbour.

If love is only how we feel about a particular person, then we're just as likely to be turned away as moved to love. How do you love somebody you don't like?

How do you look into the face of an enemy – someone who has done you harm - and feel unqualified love? Impossible, you might say.

Biblical love is something we do, *and keep on doing*. To love our neighbour as ourselves is to act toward the other as we would act toward ourselves and those close to us.

We are to make a conscious choice to treat strangers as kindly as we treat those that we love emotionally. To love even those people we don't like. Not easy!

Somebody said that the measure of Christian love and grace is not what is preached in Church on Sunday, but how the people help the needy from Monday to Friday.

What then, about love of God? How do we love God?

We make a positive choice to serve God in every way we can.

We can love God with our heart: through generosity to God's people.

We can love God with our soul: by worshipping God, and through praying for our neighbours and ourselves.

We can love God with our minds: by studying his Word, and letting it show us where we go wrong, letting it correct us, enlighten us, and inspire us to loving action in the world around us.

And, says Jesus, these two commandments are connected: "the greatest and first commandment ..." and the "second is like it": 'Love your neighbour as you love yourself.'

When we love God's people, we are loving God as well. In the 1st Letter of John, we read: *"Those who say, 'I love God', and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen."* (1 John 4:20)

Love for God and love for others are inseparable. Notice again: we're not commanded to *feel the emotion* of love - we are commanded to *act* in love. Sometimes the one follows the other. In Christ, we can do it, even if we don't feel like it.

Putting into practice the command to love our neighbour does not make it any less important to love God. The first part comes first! God is the reference point for all human life. What we owe to God is not obedience to a specific law, but our total approach to life – with all our heart, with all our soul, with all our mind.

We are made in the Image of God: in the image of a God who has loved us from the beginning of time, a God who loved the world so much that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not die but have eternal life.

Maybe we think we can't live up to those high standards, but that doesn't mean that we should give up and not try. We have the encouragement of the God who loves us and wants us to succeed: the God who is all around us, and within us, who strengthens us and who sends us out to love other people: the God who tells us to love more fully and more perfectly, because, although showing perfect love is impossible for us, nothing is impossible with God.

At a time of change, when many church buildings are scheduled for closure, it's good to remember that we are the Church, the 'Body of Christ': called, and expected, to follow Christ, and empowered through the Spirit to live fully in the ways of the kingdom of God that he revealed.

Jesus said, *"The kingdom of God is within you."*

The Spirit of God, the Spirit of Jesus, in all its love and forgiveness, lives within us to inspire us to live a life of righteousness, of right relationships with God and with all the people around us.

In that belief, in that faith, in that confidence, let us step forward into this day, into this week, into the rest of our lives, to do our best to love the Lord our God with all our heart, and with all our soul, and with all our mind, and our neighbours as ourselves.

Amen. *Soli Deo Gloria.*

During the next hymn please bring the Offering to the Chancel

Hymn 549 How deep the Father's love for us

Dedication of Offering

Lord God,

You inspire us to love beyond the limits of those we know, or those with whom we are comfortable. May the gifts from our time and talents remind us that all we have is from you, and encourage us to love not just with our hearts, but with imagination, and without reserve. In the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

Prayers of Intercession

Gracious God,

In this brief time of worship, and remembering that we shall shortly return to the realities and problems of everyday, we bring to you a world deeply in need of love and care, a world full of vulnerable and suffering people, innocent people driven every which way by forces they cannot control.

In these past days of wild winds and heavy rain we pray for people affected by flooding, in our own country, and, even more severely, in other countries: everywhere that lives and livelihoods, people and property, are damaged and lost; for all who suffer because of storm, earthquake, eruption and all the rest.

We look with increasing horror at war and terrorism, and the devastation they bring: in Israel and Palestine; in Ukraine;

and in Syria, Yemen, Ethiopia, Somalia, Burkina Faso, Mali, Mozambique, Nigeria, and many other places.

May it be that governments of all nations will indeed work together in the cause of peace.

We pray for all those who have fled their homes and countries seeking sanctuary and protection, and safety.

We bring before you people who live daily under the threat of violence, poverty, debt, climate destruction, asking that they may experience justice within their lifetimes.

We pray for all those in need in our own society: those without homes, people sleeping rough, the marginalised, those daily facing discrimination.

We pray for those who are ill;

all who are struggling with bereavement;

for those who fear they can no longer cope; those driven into stress and mental illness.

Bring comfort and rest where there is none, and guide them to sources of help.

Now, Loving God,

we pray for those closest to us, those whose troubles and needs occupy our minds, as in quietness we bring them to you.

Pause

Lord of all compassion and love, for all those people in our prayers,

known to us or unknown, we ask that they may be enveloped in your grace and peace;

that they may know your healing and transforming power in their lives;

above all, that they may know the breadth and depth of your love.

For ourselves, as we go from this service today, may we be filled with Your Holy Spirit so that, remembering that you are with us every step of the way, we may carry your love and light out into the world as healers, menders, guides, and friends to all we meet.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen

Hymn 533 Will you come and follow me

Choir: As the Deer longs for running streams.

Afterthought:

A story from 'Roots' magazine about a girl called Olivia – no relation to anyone we know:

'Granny, how much do you love me?' asked Olivia.

'This much,' answered Granny, throwing her arms as wide as could be.

'But why?' asked Olivia. Granny thought for a moment. Then she began to pour her cup of tea. Olivia watched, waiting. She poured... and poured. The tea slowly filled the cup. It reached the brim.

'Granny!' exclaimed Olivia, as the tea began to flow over the edge. 'It's spilling!' But Granny continued to pour. Despite Olivia's protestations, they both watched as the tea filled the saucer, then spilled onto the worktop beneath. Olivia became quiet; she watched as the tea puddled and began to drip off the edge onto the floor.

Eventually Granny stopped pouring. 'I love God, and God loves me,' she explained. 'I have so much love in me, it just keeps overflowing *to you!*'

Closing Hymn 644 O Jesus, I have promised

Closing Words and Benediction

We have been given this new week in which to honour the God, who is easy to love, by loving the neighbours, who are sometimes difficult to love, not in our own strength, but in the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit, and in the love of the Lord Jesus, through whom all things are possible.

Let us go on our way rejoicing.

And may the blessing of almighty God,
the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit,
rest upon you and remain with you
now and for ever. 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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