

**ORPHIR and STENNESS CHURCH**  
**Sunday 28<sup>th</sup>. January 2024; Epiphany 4B**  
**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 fellowship and celebration together.

Today we read Mark's story about the beginning of Jesus's ministry, and his first miracle.

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

*Pause*

Silent, surrendered, calm, still.

In all the busy-ness of today, can I find a moment of calmness and stillness now?

Can I feel God's presence here, and surrender myself to it, opening myself to listen to his word?

Silent, surrendered, calm and still, open to the word of God, humbled to his will.

**Gathering Prayer:**

Happy and blessed are those who walk in wisdom.

In reverence and worship let us seek the authority and wisdom of God. Amen.

**Call to worship**

As individuals, we have heard God's call to be here today,  
 to listen for his voice through Scripture,  
 through teaching, music, through one another, and all we experience together.  
 As a community, we gather to help one another in discerning the word of God.

**Let us worship God:**

**Hymn 167** Guide me O thy great Jehovah

**Opening Prayer & Lord's Prayer**

We gather together in the presence of God.

May God remind us that this is a special time,  
 and reveal to us its special qualities - a time tingling with gladness,  
 that brings us face to face with mystery;  
 a time for letting go, and for reaching out beyond ourselves.

We come from the busy-ness of everyday affairs,  
 bringing to God the things that have occupied our minds in the past days.  
 We worry about the people who are dear to us, and about ourselves.  
 Life lays urgent claims upon us; we are confused by difficult choices;  
 we hesitate; we compromise; we fall short of our own ideals;  
 and we bring our regrets and our failures.

Amid all the troubles around us, we become discouraged,  
 and we seek the comfort and reassurance of God's renewing power.  
 May His boundless love reach out to us again, and capture us, and keep us.  
 May we find in this brief time whatever we need on our personal journey.

We pray that the Gospel of the costly life and death and resurrection  
 of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ

may push through our defences, and reach our hearts,  
 that all those who meet us in our daily lives may see in us  
 neither a contradiction nor a denial of him we seek to serve,  
 but a life consistent, and in harmony, the life of those who hear good news,  
 and take it home with them, and take it seriously.

Today, and in the week ahead, may we have the faith  
 to entrust ourselves, and entrust those we love, into his care.

We bring all our prayers in the name of Jesus, who taught us to pray, saying:

*Our Father, who 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, and the power,  
 and the glory, for ever. Amen.*

**Readings: Shona will read for us:**

**Psalms 111 (New Century Version): Praise the Lord's Goodness**

Praise the Lord!

I will thank the Lord with all my heart  
 in the meeting of his good people.  
 The Lord does great things;  
 those who enjoy them seek them.  
 What he does is glorious and splendid,  
 and his goodness continues forever.  
 His miracles are unforgettable.  
 The Lord is kind and merciful.  
 He gives food to those who fear him.  
 He remembers his agreement forever.  
 He has shown his people his power  
 when he gave them the lands of other nations.

Everything he does is good and fair;  
 all his orders can be trusted.  
 They will continue forever.  
 They were made true and right.  
 He sets his people free.  
 He made his agreement everlasting.  
 He is holy and wonderful.

Wisdom begins with respect for the Lord;  
 those who obey his orders have good understanding.  
 He should be praised forever. *Amen*

**Mark 1:21-28 (New Revised Standard Version, Anglicised):**

***The Man with an Unclean Spirit***

They went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught.  
 They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as  
 the scribes. Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, and he cried  
 out, 'What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know

who you are, the Holy One of God.' But Jesus rebuked him, saying, 'Be silent, and come out of him!' And the unclean spirit, throwing him into convulsions and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, 'What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.' At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.  
*Amen. Thanks be to God.*

**Hymn (2) 112** God, whose almighty word" –

### **Message:**

A bit of background:

After spending time in the desert, Jesus has started building his team, calling his first disciples. He has been preaching in the region, and today we find him in Capernaum, a fishing town on the left bank near the top of the Sea of Galilee. At that time, it was a busy, cosmopolitan place, a commercial centre, on the Great Maritime Road, the great trade route that connected Capernaum with world markets on the Mediterranean Sea, with Asia to the north and east, and Africa to the south. Its situation ensured not only bountiful supplies of fish but also markets with goods from all over the world. This is where Jesus made his home, and where his ministry really began. and where Mark records his first miracle.

The action takes place in the local synagogue, a small place, not like the Temple in Jerusalem. The synagogue was primarily a teaching institution. There, on the Sabbath, local leaders organised worship, comprising prayer, reading from the Scriptures, and exposition or comment on the passage. There was no organised ministry, and the Leaders, the Scribes, could call upon anyone to read, and to expound on the reading. The explanation took the form of quoting from some authority: '*There is a teaching that ...*' Or: '*As Moses said...*'; '*As Rabbi whatsisname said ...*' - but no original thought. This is why the people were amazed by Jesus's teaching: he taught, not from the words of others, but with authority and independence, from his own knowledge and experience of life and of God.

Remember too: the people of Jesus's time, and for long after (as still indeed in some societies today) believe that they are surrounded by a huge number of evil spirits, seeking to do them harm. Spirits that cause illness and death and all kinds of misfortune. Places where witchcraft, voodoo, and the occult were - places where they still are - part of everyday experience.

Picture the scene that day. Imagine you were there. An ordinary Sunday here in Orphir Kirk, or any other church. The minister, or leader, is well into the sermon. You're concentrating on what he or she is saying, or maybe thinking about what you'll have for dinner.

Suddenly a man in the congregation jumps to his feet, shouting - swearing maybe: '*What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God.*'

The Preacher says: "Shut up! Get out of him!" (As blunt as that in the Greek!) The man goes into a kind of convulsion, then he is quiet; maybe gets up from the floor and sits down again; maybe walks quietly out of the church. We're not told the end of the story.

The people are astonished. "*What's this? A new kind of teaching, spoken with authority. He gives commands even to unclean spirits, and they obey him.*"

Maybe we would have reacted differently. But this is a strange story. Mark doesn't tell us anything at all about the man. Jesus doesn't speak to the man – he speaks to the spirit, and with complete authority. The evil spirit shook the man violently, gave a loud cry, and then

came out of him. No more details about whether the man recovered, or about happened next, except that Jesus's reputation quickly spread far and wide.

What's going on here? We don't need to speculate about what psychiatric condition might have been affecting that man, or whether Jesus was ahead of his time, but acted in accordance with the beliefs of the people who were there.

Mark doesn't waste time or words. His main purpose is to show the complete authority of Jesus, to show who he is, and what is his purpose. The religious leaders don't recognise him: the unclean spirit does. Moment by moment Mark opens our eyes to who Jesus is. He establishes Jesus' credentials as the one we can trust in all circumstances, especially when things go wrong. Shortly Mark will show how Jesus' authority extends to forgiveness: remember his words to a paralysed man lowered through the roof of a crowded house by his friends: "My son, your sins are forgiven" (*Mark 2:1-12*). He will tell us about how a raging storm is calmed, and the rescued crew of a small boat asking, "Who is this, that even the winds and waves obey him?" (*Mark 4: 35-41*.)

A new kind of teaching.

*Our* faith has to adapt to new kinds of teaching. Our faith has to be continually changing and evolving in response to the changes and the evolution going on in the world around us, and in the light of new understanding. I don't believe that God spoke to a few people – 'prophets' – thousands of years ago, and then stopped. I believe that God has continued to speak to us *through the present-day prophets*: theologians; liberal theologians; scientists; medical people who have developed ever more sophisticated surgery to address conditions thought to be incurable; the people who continue to develop new medicines to cope with cancer – and I'm one of the beneficiaries.

A new kind of teaching. With our modern medicine and psychiatry, we have a vastly different language to describe illnesses today. Nowadays, we don't believe in being possessed by evil spirits, but we can take the dramatic event in that synagogue, and other New Testament stories about exorcism, on different levels. It is sometimes said that we all have our demons – things we struggle with in our lives, traumatic memories; temptations; disappointments, failures; inadequacies, phobias. Jesus can help put them in perspective.

In the Letter to the Ephesians we find a warning as relevant today as it was then: "*Our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh but against..., spiritual forces of evil*" (*Ephesians 6:12*).

The reality of evil in the world is beyond dispute: poverty, disease, starvation, injustice, terrorism, war, and at a personal level, the unseen forces that shape our own lives, the pressures, the influences, the illusions, the addictions that deflect us from being the person that God intended us to be. Somebody said, "*The only thing necessary for evil to triumph is for good people to do nothing.*" God invites all of us to collaborate with him in overcoming evil, in all its many forms: by trying to follow in the example of Jesus; by loving our neighbour as ourselves; by working with others to care for those most disadvantaged. "*Do not be overcome by evil*", says Paul, "*But overcome evil with good*". (*Romans 12:21*).

A new kind of teaching. Scientists and other *prophets of our time* continually warn about our misuse of the world: about global warming, climate change, and all the rest. The Covid pandemic has shown scientists and medical people better ways to produce vaccines and to cope with disease outbreaks. Ministers and church leaders have developed new ways to reach out to the people at a time of great challenge and change in the Church, here and throughout the country. '*Oh, it's no like the aald weys!*' But the '*aald weys*' have been superseded in a great many changes in the world of today. **God is still speaking to us if we have the humility to listen: if we have ears to hear.**

*Our faith, our attitudes, our outlook, must rise to meet changes and challenges in our everyday life, in our families, our church, our community. We need to show people that the Church, the Christian fellowship, really has something for everybody.*

Jesus certainly brought a new kind of teaching. New teaching that would bring him into deadly conflict with the worldly authorities, who represented the old teaching, the old ways. New teaching, and a claim to act on divine authority, that would lead to his death.

A new teaching. But much more. Jesus's authority, his ministry, his example, show us not only a new teaching, but a whole new way of life. In the early days of the Church, the Christian faith was known simply as "*The Way*." Jesus came that we may have life, life in all its fullness. Jesus invites us to look to the reality of a different world — and to live and work towards it.

At the time of the incident in the synagogue, Jesus was still calling his disciples, building his team. In our time, in a very different world, he is still building his team. Are we prepared to commit ourselves, or to commit ourselves anew, to being one of his team in our own place and our own circumstances? I leave you to answer the question.

Amen. *Soli Deo Gloria.*

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

**3rd (Offering) Hymn 755** Be still and know that I am God

#### **Dedication of Offering:**

Gracious God,

For a new day, a new week, for new opportunities, for all your gifts and goodness to us, we offer our heartfelt thanks.

As now we bring these gifts of money, tokens of our prosperity, help us to bring ourselves.

With these gifts, take us and use us in your ways and for your purposes and to your glory. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

#### **Prayers of Intercession:**

God of mercy and of love,  
we pray for the world and its peoples.

We look in sadness on the ever-widening gap between advantaged and disadvantaged, the haves and the have-nots, and we pray for victims of injustice of every kind; for the millions who starve, while others live in abundance; for the sick and injured and all who have no access to the latest medical technology. We pray for the victims of war in Gaza, in Ukraine and Yemen and many other places, injured, grieving, homeless, especially for civilian casualties.

We pray for minorities with little prospect of education, or employment, or health care; for refugees driven from their homes, trusting themselves to unscrupulous criminals and unseaworthy boats.

Each day's news seems to bring more details of dishonesty and duplicity among people in high places, in government and business; of a culture labelled '*institutionally racist, sexist and homophobic*' among people we thought we could trust; sub-postmasters and postmistresses victimised in the biggest miscarriage of justice in UK history. We pray for people who daily face discrimination, and for return to the honesty, integrity, and concern for others

exemplified in the life and teaching of Jesus Christ our Lord.

God of all,  
In the face of the world's injustice and suffering, there seems little we can do,  
yet, from among all that needs to be done, help us to recognise a few things we *can* do,  
and help us to do them well, and, in faith and humility,  
to leave the management to you and to those others whom you enlist in your service.

In a moment of silence, we bring to you our private prayers for the things that weigh heavily upon us today.

*Pause*

Gracious God,  
hasten the time when weeping will turn to laughter and fear to dancing;  
when *'justice shall roll down like waterfalls and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream'*.

For your love's sake. Amen.

**Hymn (4): 530** One more step

**Choir: Hy. 556** I need Thee every hour

#### **Afterthought:**

I would recommend to you the late Archbishop Desmond Tutu's book, *'Made for Goodness'*. Near the beginning he writes:

We are endowed, like the creator, with this gift of creativity. Anyone who has seen a dancer in motion or an artist at work, anyone who has enjoyed the skill of a good cook or watched a child build a sandcastle or make a mud pie, knows that human creativity is inherent. We may apply our creativity to good ends or ill. Human artistry can be used to decorate a home or forge a banknote. Human resourcefulness can combine the chemicals to purify a well or poison a watercourse. The beautiful gardens at the Palace of Versailles in France and at Mount Vernon in Virginia were the fruit of human inventiveness. The minefields that still kill and maim in Angola and Cambodia were also planned and planted by human beings. In our creativity we are like God. We are also like God in our freedom. God is self-constrained in relationship to us. God leaves us free to choose how we apply our gifts and talents. Like a good parent, God renders *God's-self* powerfully powerless in the face of our choices. When we see the pride shining in a mother's eyes as her little darling squeals out his first clarinet recital, we can imagine the face of God as God surveys our successes. When we watch the pained calm of a parent listening to a report of his child's misdeeds, we can imagine the anguished eyes of God as God sees us stumble, fall, and fail. In all the diverse expressions of humanity we are made like God. (*'Made for Goodness', p. 10-11*)

**Closing Hymn (5): 533** Will you come and follow me

#### **Closing Words and Benediction:**

May the authority of Christ Jesus keep you from all evil.  
May he endow you with great love, and fill you with joy and praise.  
May you share your blessings with those you meet.  
... 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:**

(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.