

ORPHIR and STENNESS CHURCH
Transcript of ZOOM: Service for Sunday 3rd. January 2021; Epiphany B

Introduction and Prayer(Martin):

Good morning,

It's good to speak to you again, wherever you are.

Today we hear the familiar story of the Wise Men. It's a story that involves searching for the new-born king, searching at first in the wrong place, then by following a star, and then, by God's guidance in a dream, taking a different route home.

Looking for the direction that God has for us is not always as easy as following a star, or hearing from God in a dream. Maybe you experienced God's help and guidance in the past. Can you remember when, and how?

At the beginning of this new year, it is good for all of us to think about where best to look for and to recognise signs from God that offer us his guidance for our lives.

Hymn 270 - Put all your trust in God

Befehl du deine Wege

- 1 Put all your trust in God,
in duty's path go on;
walk in his strength with faith and hope,
so shall your work be done.
Give to the winds your fears;
hope, and be undismayed;
God hears your sighs and counts your tears,
God shall lift up your head.
- 2 Through waves, and clouds, and storms
he gently clears your way;
await his time; so shall this night
soon end in joyful day.
Leave to his sovereign sway
to choose and to command;
then you shall marvel at his way
how wise, how strong his hand!
- 3 You see our weakness, Lord;
our hearts are known to you;
give strength to every failing hand
and keep our footsteps true.
Let us, in life, in death,
your steadfast truth declare,
confessing, with our final breath,
your love and guardian care.

Paul Gerhardt (1607-1676)
adapted *John Wesley (1703-1791)

Opening Prayer

On this first Sunday of the New Year,
in our separate places, but united in our fellowship,
we come to God, the Lord of yesterday, today and tomorrow,
bringing our thanks for his goodness and guidance in the past year.
We come in a mixture of hope, anticipation, and expectation;
of fear, and excitement.

We are fearful of what may be in store for us in the year ahead.
As the Covid pandemic continues,
we pray that the disease may be brought under control.
We bring our worries:
about health and family; about jobs, and security, and finances.

May we have faith to look forward with optimism
to the easing and removal of the restrictions;
and to the 'normal' things that we often take for granted:
the love of family and friends;
good company and good fellowship;
the laughter of children.

Whatever the coming year may hold of uncertainty and of hope,
may we entrust each and every day to God's care,
in the faith that he will be with us as he has been in the past.

In that faith, may we place ourselves and those we love into God's keeping
and dedicate ourselves anew to his service.
through Jesus Christ our Lord,
in whose name we offer all our prayers. Amen

Readings

Ephesians 3: 1-12 New Century Version ***Paul's Work in Telling the Good News***

So I, Paul, am a prisoner of Christ Jesus for you who are not Jews. Surely you have heard that God gave me this work to tell you about his grace. He let me know his secret by showing it to me. I have already written a little about this. If you read what I wrote then, you can see that I truly understand the secret about the Christ. People who lived in other times were not told that secret. But now, through the Spirit, God has shown that secret to his holy apostles and prophets. This is that secret: that through the Good News those who are not Jews will share with the Jews in God's blessing. They belong to the same body, and they share together in the promise that God made in Christ Jesus.

By God's special gift of grace given to me through his power, I became a servant to tell that Good News.

I am the least important of all God's people, but God gave me this gift—to tell those who are not Jews the Good News about the riches of Christ, which are too great to understand fully. And God gave me the work of telling all people about the plan for his secret, which has been hidden in him since the beginning of time. He is the One who created everything. His purpose was that through the church all the rulers and powers in the heavenly world will now know God's wisdom, which has so many forms. This agrees with the purpose God had since the beginning of time, and he carried out his plan through Christ Jesus our Lord. In Christ we can come before God with freedom and without fear. We can do this through faith in Christ.

Hymn 555 – Amazing Grace

Amazing grace! How sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now am found;
Was blind, but now I see.

Twas Grace that taught my heart to fear
And Grace my fears relieved
How precious did that Grace appear
The hour I first believed

Through many dangers, toils and snares,
We have already come;
'Tis grace hath brought us safe thus far,
And grace will lead us home

When we've been there ten thousand years,
Bright shining as the sun,
We've no less days to sing God's praise
Than when we'd first begun.

Matthew 2:1-12, Contemporary English Version, *The Wise Men*

When Jesus was born in the village of Bethlehem in Judea, Herod was king. During this time some wise men from the east came to Jerusalem and said, "Where is the child born to be king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him."

When King Herod heard about this, he was worried, and so was everyone else in Jerusalem. Herod brought together the chief priests and the teachers of the Law of Moses and asked them, "Where will the Messiah be born?" They told him, "He will be born in Bethlehem, just as the prophet wrote,

'Bethlehem in the land of Judea,
you are very important among the towns of Judea.

From your town will come a leader,

who will be like a shepherd for my people Israel.'"

Herod secretly called in the wise men and asked them when they had first seen the star. He told them, "Go to Bethlehem and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, let me know. I want to go and worship him too."

The wise men listened to what the king said and then left. And the star they had seen in the east went on ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. They were thrilled and excited to see the star.

When the men went into the house and saw the child with Mary, his mother, they knelt down and worshiped him. They took out their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh and gave them to him. Later they were warned in a dream not to return to Herod, and they went back home by another road.

Message (Martin):

The story of the visit of the Wise Men is one of the best loved stories in the New Testament. Over the centuries, scientists, astronomers, historians and theologians have struggled to link that star to the events of the story, and they're still at it, as we saw in recent weeks. Others insist that the story is not meant to be accurate in every detail. At this distance in time it's not possible to disentangle fact from legend. But I don't think that matters.

As one theologian said,

"I don't know if it happened this way or not, but I know this story is true."

That approach allows us to hear again the Christmas stories as true stories, even though we know that some elements may not be historically accurate.

What does matter is beyond dispute. About the year zero AD, in the most inauspicious of circumstances, a boy was born to a frightened teenage peasant lassie, somewhere in what was then part of the Roman empire, ruled by one of the most powerful men in history. And the world has never been the same since.

In his poem, "*The Journey Of The Magi*", T.S. Eliot pictures these Wise Men, having seen the Christ Child in the manger, returning home,
"no longer at ease [there], in the old dispensation,
With an alien people clutching their gods."
[poem reads ...'at ease here...']

Realising that nothing can ever be the same again. That the birth of the Christ child meant the death of their world of paganism, and magic, and astrology. It was decision time: a time of looking back to the old familiar ways, and a time of looking forward to a new way of life.

For the Romans, Janus was the god of gates and doorways, of beginnings and endings. We find his name in the month of January, the beginning of the new year, and the janitor, the caretaker of doors and halls. Janus was usually shown with two heads, looking in opposite directions – looking into the past with one face, and into the future with the other.

Looking back, and looking forward. I'm sure we've all been doing that over the last few days, reviewing the last year, a year like no other. But I hope there has been happiness too.

In Scotland we're very good at looking back, and it's easy to slip into maudlin sentimentality, as we sit with our tears dripping into our whisky – or Coca Cola - and agreeing that "*It's no like the auld days.*"

It's easy to get stuck in the rut, afraid to change from old familiar ways, or take a fresh look at things. One positive feature of the Pandemic is that it has made us do just that!

Looking back, and looking forward. Maybe we tend to do too much looking back and too little looking forward. It's easy to look back on things – or people - that have upset us, and to remember the old offences, the old grudges – to count our store of wrongs, just what Paul warns us not to do in 1 Cor. 13.

I guess the Burns Supper celebrations this year will be restricted, but I am sure you will know Burns's words:

*"But och! I backward cast my e'e
On prospects drear!
An forward, tho I canna see,
I guess, and fear!"*

I can sympathise with that view. When I backward cast my e'e, there are certainly prospects drear. Things I wish I had not said, had not done. Things I could, and should, have said, or done. Mistakes. Missed opportunities. Sin.

What about you? Did you get everything right? Did you miss any opportunities? Did you do anything in 2020 to further the cause of Jesus Christ?

We tend to remember the bad things, and take the good for granted, and we have good reason to be apprehensive about the unknown future that stretches before us. Let's remind ourselves that we have every reason to look *forward*.

Why? Because we cannot change the past, but we can learn from it. We start from where we are, but in Jesus Christ we start with a clean sheet.

I believe that God will direct us in the year ahead. His guiding hand is not always obvious, because he gives us the blessing, or the responsibility, of freedom of choice, but his guidance is there for the asking. We look forward with hope and optimism - because we remember the Light that came into the world - the light that has never been extinguished.

The Child in the Manger is also the Jesus of Easter - the crucified and risen Christ. The Christ who told us that he came so that we may have life in all its fullness. Our reading from Ephesians reminds us that, *'In Christ we can come before God with freedom and without fear'*.

That means we have an open door to the presence of God himself. A very reassuring concept to take us into 2021.

In the words of Hymn 270:

*Put all your trust in God, in duty's path go on...
Leave to his sovereign sway to choose and to command;
Then you shall marvel at his way,
how wise, how strong his hand."*

On Christmas Day, 1939, at one of the darkest times of our history, at the beginning of the Second World War, King George VI broadcast his Christmas Message to the nation. He included part of a poem by Minnie Louise Haskins:

*I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year
'Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown.'*

*And he replied,
'Go into the darkness and put your hand into the hand of God
That shall be to you better than light and safer than a known way!'*

*So I went forth and finding the Hand of God
Trode gladly into the night
He led me towards the hills
And the breaking of day in the lone east.*

Go forward into the new week, and into this New Year, and put your hand into the hand of God. That shall be to you better than light and safer than a known way!'

May God bless you and yours.
Amen Soli Deo Gloria.

Hymn 336 Christ is our Light! the bright and morning star

Christ is our light! the bright and morning star
covering with radiance all from near and far.
Christ be our light, shine on, shine on we pray
into our hearts, into our world today.

Christ is our love! baptized that we may know
the love of God among us, swooping low.
Christ be our love, bring us to turn our face
and see in you the light of heaven's embrace.

Christ is our joy! transforming wedding guest!
Through water turned to wine the feast was blessed.
Christ be our joy; your glory let us see,
as your disciples did in Galilee

Concluding Prayer and Blessing:

Let us pray:

As this new year begins, may we leave behind all that is past,
and walk together into the future, trusting in the God of new beginnings,
worshipping the God of fresh hopes.

Gracious and Loving God, Lord of all our journeys,
help us to have eyes to see your leading, ears to hear your guidance,
and courageous hearts to travel in faith,
trusting in you to find our way,
even when the path may seem difficult and dark.

We give thanks that you speak to us, and use us, in many ways,
sometimes unexpected ways.
Help us to look out for the people and the situations
through which you speak to us,
and to know what you are calling us to be, and to do, in your name.

Help us to make our faith an everyday faith in which your will is done,
and your kingdom comes among us.

In these anxious times, we pray for wisdom for those who lead and govern.
We pray for people everywhere who are ill, or worried, or sad,
overtired, overworked, overstressed;
especially those we carry in our minds and hearts today.

Lord, as we continue our journey with you into this new week, and this new year,
as we seek to live out our faith every day,
be always with us,
surprise us with your love,
prompt us when you want us to see, or do, something new,
for Jesus' sake. Amen

Now may you stay safe in the way of Christ,
constantly seeking, always believing,
that there is a light that shines in the darkness
which the darkness shall not overcome.
May the love of the Creator, the joy of the Spirit,
and the peace of the Christ-child be with you.
And the blessing of God almighty,
the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit,
be with you, and remain with you,
now, into this New Year, and evermore. Amen.