

**ORPHIR and STENNESS CHURCH**  
**Handout for Sunday 10<sup>th</sup>. January 2021, Baptism of the Lord, Year B**

**Introduction:**

In the present circumstances of the Coronavirus pandemic, when we are unable to hold our Church services, we think of other Christian people here, and all over the world, and especially family and friends who are separated from us. I invite you to use this service in whatever way is best for you. You may like to look up the hymns and read – or sing – them, or Google them and listen online. If you know of anyone who would like to receive these services and is not on the list, please pass email address to Nicol or Kathryn, and please feel free to pass on hard copies to people who don't have internet access. God bless you all.

**Gathering Words and Prayer**

*First, let us be still and quiet for a few moments.*

*We remind ourselves that, wherever we are, we are in the presence of the living God.*

*We lay aside our worries and concerns and open ourselves to his word. Amen.*

**Call to worship**

Gathered in our separate places, yet united in our Christian fellowship, we join our voices with the whole church, across the world and across time.

**Hymn (1): 139** Praise the Lord, you heavens, adore him

**Opening Prayer and Lord's Prayer**

God of light, light of light,  
true God of true God,  
We bless you

God of new beginnings, hope of hope,  
as we reach for this new year,  
We bless you

God of joy, delight of delight,  
as we give thanks for all that is good,  
We bless you

Lord of Hope,  
we give you thanks for a new day.  
We arise today  
to the wide horizons of land and sea and sky,  
drawing our eyes beyond everyday things  
to the wonders of Your creation  
and to the awareness that you are all around us and within us,  
and yet above and beyond us,  
and that we are enfolded in your love.  
For this and more we thank you.

Lord of Hope  
we give you thanks for a new year scarcely begun,  
and for the opportunities and challenges it may hold.  
We arise today to the knowledge  
that Your Son, our Lord, goes before us;  
to the hope that, through His presence,  
all people will be transformed;

to the promise of salvation for all.  
For this and more we thank you.

Lord of Hope  
we give You thanks for a new start.  
We arise today  
turning our backs on the ways of judgement and criticism of others;  
sloughing off narrow-minded assumptions;  
reaching out with generous compassionate hearts  
to friend and to enemy alike.  
For the promise of a new start,  
a new day,  
a new year,  
for these gifts, and for so much more, we thank you.

Gracious God,  
we acknowledge the times when we have got things wrong;  
for selfishness in ignoring or forgetting the needs of others,  
for hanging on to old grumbles and prejudices.  
In your forgiving love, help us to go into the time ahead with open minds and open hearts.

As the Pandemic continues and increases,  
help us all to play our part in restricting spread of the disease,  
and to do all that we can to protect other people and ourselves.  
We bring all these our prayers in the name of Jesus Christ. In his words we pray together,  
saying:  
*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.*

**Hymn (2): 141** Oh the life of the world

**Readings:**

**Genesis 1: 1-5: (NRSVA) *Six Days of Creation and the Sabbath***

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

**Acts 19: 1-7; (NRSVA) *Paul in Ephesus***

While Apollos was in Corinth, Paul passed through the inland regions and came to Ephesus, where he found some disciples. He said to them, 'Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?' They replied, 'No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.' Then he said, 'Into what then were you baptized?' They answered, 'Into John's baptism.' Paul said, 'John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, in Jesus.' On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. When Paul had laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied - altogether there were about twelve of them.

**Hymn (3): 336** Christ is our light!

## Gospel Reading

### Mark 1: 4-11 (NRSVA)

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, 'The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.'

### *The Baptism of Jesus*

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'

## Message

Today is the second Sunday of the year, but it is still a time of **new beginnings**. We are living in strange and uncertain times, and there is still the carry-over, and the unfinished business of 2020. We are still looking back, and looking forward. Looking back on 2020 with relief, and a feeling of good riddance, but maybe also with sadness and regret for people who are no longer with us, and for changes in our world, our church, and our own personal circumstances. We are looking forward with a mixture of eagerness and foreboding to the year that stretches ahead of us.

This year, more than most, the troubles we have encountered in the year past give us reason to look on the down side. I find that, when I look back, it seems to be the down-side that come to mind most easily: the things that I got wrong, how I might have done better. Maybe some of you are the same. Yet the very fact that the things we got wrong are the first to come to mind suggests that it is the things that we *got right*, the things that went well, the positive things, that are the norm. We don't remember them because they are routine. That's how things are most of the time. We learn from the past, but, despite the down-side, there is every reason to look forward with enthusiasm and optimism.

The start of the New Year is a time of endings, and new beginnings. But it is also a time to remind ourselves that some things are eternal – things like the Word of the Lord; like the Love of God.

Peter tells us:

'All flesh is like grass, and all its glory like the flower of grass.

The grass withers, and the flower falls, but the word of the Lord endures for ever. (1 Peter 1: 24-25)

Maybe he was thinking of Isaiah:

*The grass withers, the flower fades;*

*but the word of our God will stand for ever. (Isaiah 4: 8)*

In Psalm 136 we read:

*Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good.*

*His love endures for ever.*

Every second line of this Psalm emphasises that *His love endures for ever*.

And: *The world and its desires pass away, but whoever does the will of God lives forever.*  
(1 John 2:17, NIV)

All of the scripture readings for today speak to us about **new beginnings**, and I think they hold messages for us here in Orkney at the start of a New Year.

The first of all the new beginnings was the creation of the universe. Whether or not you believe in the Genesis accounts does not matter. The world that God brought into being, over seven days, or over countless ages, is the same world that we inhabit in this day and generation.

The anonymous writers of Genesis tells us that, when God created the universe, the earth was formless and desolate. There was darkness and chaos. Out of the disorder and disunity God brought form and order.

There is a magical moment near the beginning of Haydn's "Creation" when at the end of the first day the chorus of angels proclaims:

*"A new-created world springs up at God's command."*

**Our reading tells us: God was pleased with what he saw.**

Is God still pleased with what he sees? I think with amusement of Charles Murray's poem, 'Gin I Was God', in which he imagines God having second thoughts about his creation:

*I'd 'Own my mistak', an', aince I'd cleared the brod,  
Start a'thing ower again, gin I was God'.*

I wonder if God is disappointed, or dismayed, or sad, or angry when he sees how we have used, and abused, the world in which he placed us. Sometimes it seems that all that is worst in human nature – the selfishness, and self-interest and greed - have pushed aside consideration for the world. The race to exploit the earth's resources has led to devastation in many places, to pollution of the atmosphere, global warming, poisoning of the environment, and the destruction of traditional ways of living. Hunger and desolation, resulting from global change brought about by human activity, is a fact of life in Africa, India, South America and many other countries.

Somebody has said that the announcement of profits has replaced the message of prophets! Preoccupation with money and profit margins all too often seem to be the main consideration in the search for contentment and satisfaction in this world.

But we all know that true happiness comes of God. We know that inner contentment stems from recognising the overflowing love God has for the world – this world that belongs to God, and where God remains in command.

The message of Christmas, the message of the New Testament, is that Jesus Christ came into the world, and the world has never been the same since. *"Love came down at Christmas."* Love came into the world. The Word that was made flesh and lived among us shows us that our lives are precious to God. Jesus brings us the good news that we are loved – loved without condition, loved without limit, loved beyond measure.

***No cause for doom and gloom!***

We find new beginnings also for Paul's Christian community in Ephesus. We read about it in Acts 19:1-7. The early church was growing very rapidly, but like our church today, it had its problems. There were doubters and dissidents, and divisions and disputes, and belief in astrology and magic still persisted in many places. There were misunderstandings about what faith was all about, not least belief in the resurrection. Paul had an uphill struggle in coping with the diehards of first century paganism on the one hand, and, on the other, with those among the fellowship whose aim was to cause division.

When we look at today's Church we might just find a parallel or two. We don't have to look far to find the same negative attitudes, and prejudice, and ignorance.

Here Paul questions a group from the early church. "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?" "We have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit," they answered. "Well, then," says Paul, "what kind of baptism did you receive?" "The baptism of John," they answered.

John the Baptist is the forerunner, the person who prepares the way for the ministry of Jesus that will restore the relationship of the people with God. John's message is:  
*If you think what I am telling you is important – just wait – something much more important is just round the corner!*

The Ephesians have been baptised by John. Paul tells them, "John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, in Jesus." When they heard this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. Paul laid his hands on them, and the Holy Spirit came upon them.

A **new beginning** for that community, with all its misunderstandings and contradictory ideas. Paul reminds them that the message of Jesus Christ – his life, his ministry, his death and resurrection, his life – all show God's loving, saving purposes for the world.

Maybe there are some in the church of today who have never heard of the Holy Spirit, or have forgotten what it should mean – forgotten to witness to what God can do in their place and in their time.

### **There is a new beginning for Jesus.**

Some theologians think that Jesus may have started his career as a disciple of John. In the beginning, John the Baptist was better known than Jesus. Josephus, the Jewish historian, tells us more about John than he does about Jesus. Some of John's followers considered him superior to Jesus, to the extent that there was a rivalry between the followers of John and the followers of Jesus. As we have seen, Paul meets believers who look to John rather than to Jesus for their faith, and Paul gently sets them straight.

Jesus's baptism marks the beginning of his ministry. Maybe it is surprising that, so soon after hearing the Christmas story, we hear of the baptism of Jesus. Surprising that John, who was preparing the way for Jesus, should have been called on to baptise Jesus.

We can never know exactly what happened at Jesus's baptism, what he saw, what he heard, or what other people saw and heard, but Mark emphasises for us that the Spirit is given to Jesus. Jesus is confirmed as God's Son.

In his baptism Jesus voluntarily identifies with all those who seek God's forgiveness. The Spirit who descends upon Jesus is the same Spirit promised to us through Jesus, the spirit that enables us to do what God wants us to do.

All of today's readings emphasise the ongoing, continuing relationship between God and men and women. They remind us of our own rebirth in the Spirit. In the early church, baptism of adult believers was the norm, and that continues in some branches of the Christian Church today. In the Church of Scotland, and many others, we are usually baptised as infants, and, in maturity, we make a declaration of our faith. Whether at that time, or at other times, such as Holy Communion, we believe that we do receive the Holy Spirit. From time to time it is good to remind ourselves of that. We believe that, through faith and commitment, we continue in a special relationship with God through Jesus Christ. Even in these dark and worrying times of the Covid Pandemic – especially in such times – it is good to spend a little time thinking about what that means for each one of us.

Here we have encouragement to look at 2021 not only with apprehension, but also with joy and optimism and expectation.

May God bless you and yours.

Amen. Soli Deo Gloria: To God Alone Be Glory.

**(Offering) Hymn (4) 335** Out of the Flowing River

### **Dedication of Offering**

Gracious and loving God,  
all that we have and are comes of your free and generous love.  
Accept our offerings, and grant that these gifts may be hallowed by your blessing  
and used in your service; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

### **Prayers of Intercession**

As today we turn our thoughts to the needs of other people,  
may God teach us to pray for others with our feelings as well as our minds,  
with our actions and well as our words.

May we learn to pray for those who believe  
that heaven and earth are forever empty,  
and devoid of any divine purpose or compassion.  
Let there be light and hope;  
may there be faith, love, joy and peace.

Let us pray for any who fear that their wrongdoing  
has closed the heavens forever against them;  
for people who think they are too unimportant for God to notice,  
or that their worries are too trivial to mention.  
Let there be light and hope;  
may there be faith, love, joy and peace.

Let us pray for those whose loss of work,  
or broken marriages or relationships,  
or poverty and homelessness,  
makes them feel forsaken.  
Let there be light and hope;  
may there be faith, love, joy and peace.

Let us bring before God  
all those who suffer in any way because of the Covid-19 Pandemic:  
those seriously ill with the disease,  
and those who wait and watch and worry,  
especially when they are separated from their loved ones.  
Let there be light and hope;  
may there be faith, love, joy and peace.

We pray for doctors, nurses, medical teams,  
for all those tending the sick,  
often working long hours, at risk to themselves,  
overtired, overstressed;  
for those developing, distributing, and administering vaccines.  
Let there be light and hope;

may there be faith, love, joy and peace.

Let us pray for those for whom worry or stress or isolation  
has brought emotional or mental illness,  
especially those who fear that God has abandoned them.  
Let there be light and hope;  
may there be faith, love, joy and peace.

We pray for those in bondage to alcohol or drugs,  
and who find that their religion seems unable to help.  
Let us pray for any who have been too arrogant to believe in God,  
and now, in desperate need, are too stubborn to contemplate faith.  
Let there be light and hope;  
may there be faith, love, joy and peace.

May we learn to pray for one another in the church  
in this place, throughout Orkney, and throughout the world.  
May our loving God keep us all close to his beloved Son,  
in whom he is well pleased,  
that through him, and with him, we may celebrate  
the joys of an open heaven and a redeemed earth.  
Through Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.

**Closing Hymn (5) 595** O breath of life, come sweeping through us (T. St. Clement, 220)

**Closing Words and Benediction**

Now go in peace, and stay safe in the way of Christ;  
may this day, this year unfold as it should;  
may you find solace in scripture and spirit;  
and may your journey into this new year  
be filled with the hope and promise of God  
for the sake and the peace of the world.  
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:**

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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