

ORPHIR and STENNESS CHURCH
ZOOM Service Sunday 2nd May 2021; Easter 5B
Transcript; (Ed. 02.05.21)

Introduction and Prayer – Martin

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

"We are not gathered in the same building, but we know that, as we worship together, from where we are, God can hear us all.

Today we are reading about and thinking about God and our relationship with him.

A Prayer:

In our separate places, we come together as one
to reconnect with one another, and with God,
as we listen to his word and join in praise and prayer. Amen.

Hymn 485 Dear Lord and Father of mankind

Opening Prayer and Lord's Prayer

Let us pray:

*The whole round earth is every way
Bound by gold chains about the feet of God.*

In his hands God holds all of creation;
by his love the world is cherished and the Church is nurtured.
We pray that, rooted and united in his Son, Jesus Christ,
we may flourish, and, in our different ways, yet connected in common purpose,
we may reach out to people who are in need.

Jesus Christ, the true vine, in our every need we come to you,
in weakness, seeking your strength.
Without your life-giving spirit we too easily become dry and lifeless,
withering away through dead traditions, stunted by fear of new growth.

When our growth is slow or hesitant, nourish us by your love.
May our lives be rooted in yours, our understanding flow from your wisdom.
May we abide in your presence, and, as we freely receive your love,
in that love, may we bear fruit in our relationship with others,
so that the world may see us as disciples of Christ,
in whose words we 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: Elaine will read for us today:

1st Reading:

1 John 4: 7-21; (NRSVA): God Is Love

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might

live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.

By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. And we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Saviour of the world. God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God. So we have known and believe the love that God has for us.

God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgement, because as he is, so are we in this world. There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. We love because he first loved us. 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. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.

Hymn 567 Focus my Eyes on you O God

2nd Reading:

John 15:1-9; NRSVA: *Jesus the True Vine*

'I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine-grower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples. As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. Amen. *Thanks be to God.*

Message:

Both of our readings today are about the nature of God, the love of God, and our relationship with God. Both the Gospel of John and the Letter contain some of the best known and best loved verses in the New Testament.

In the Gospel, Jesus uses the familiar Old Testament image of the vine to describe the relationship between himself and his followers, and through him, their relationship with God: "*As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love*".

He is the vine; we are the branches.

The idea of abiding in Christ emphasises the concept that it is this close relationship with Jesus that leads us to "bear fruit".

What does *abiding in Christ* mean?

Prof. Willie Barclay offers a useful analogy.

Suppose a person is weak, has given in to temptation, made a complete mess of his/her life. Suppose that person has a friend of strong faith who reaches out to help, and manages to help restore the person to the right ways. The only way to avoid slipping back into the old temptations is to keep in contact with the friend. Abiding in Christ means something like that: to keep in contact with God by deliberately choosing to do so.

The Letter emphasises some of the central features of the Gospel, but also tackles some of the false teachings which had arisen within the church at that time, including heresies that denied the incarnation of Christ, insisting that Jesus only *seemed* to have a body. We pick up the Letter where John looks in greater detail at the love of God. Here we find what has been called '*the greatest statement about God in the whole Bible: that God is Love*': words so familiar that maybe we have lost sight of what an astonishing picture of God this is.

This statement does seem to go against the common experience of life. The vast majority of people in today's world live in poverty beyond our imagining: in a constant struggle to survive – recurring famine, floods, natural disasters, disease, infant mortality, war, terrorism, oppression, exploitation. Even in "developed" countries, people struggle with unemployment. Even in Orkney we need food banks. And the Covid Pandemic on top of all this. To proclaim that "God is love" seems to fly in the face of the facts of the poverty and tragedy and evil in the world.

Yet Christians proclaim that God's love pervades and goes beyond all human experience. God is Love. Maybe we say it without thinking about it. When things are going right for us, it's easy to forget that God's love is not obvious to everybody. I believe that we are commissioned to carry the message that God is for you, God is with you, God cares for you, and - God loves you.

For the agnostics, the atheists, the uncommitted, the scoffers, this message seems too good to be true. We need to remind ourselves continually that it *is* true.

We believe that, in the person of Jesus Christ, the divine love of God came into everyday human experience. The word became flesh and lived among us. In the person of Jesus, God came into our lives, not to judge us, or condemn us, but to join us, to live fully our common human experience, to be born, to live, to suffer, to die, all out of love - and to rise again to show that nothing, not even death, can extinguish this love.

By his life and death, Jesus made it possible for us to enter into a new relationship of peace and friendship with God. This is our faith, our hope, our calling, and our mission.

This relationship with God makes a claim on our lives: a requirement to open ourselves up to be loved - and to love. John writes: "Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love."

Our mission as Christians is to show that love, as revealed in Jesus Christ, is the key to life. To see all love in terms of the love of God, and to reflect God's love to the world.

To believe, and to say, "God is love" is not sentimental, and it's not easy. It demands commitment, and faith. How will anyone come to believe in this faith unless they see it in action among us? How will anyone come to believe that, beneath, the pain and suffering of common experience, flows divine love - how will anyone know, unless we live that way?

The only way to attract people from outside the church is to show them that we have something eminently worth having that they don't have. Jesus said: "Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven." (Matt. 5:16)

We have been – we are - loved by God. Even in our darkest days, a moment's thought will make us realise that. We are called upon to love others - not just those closest to us, or who are easiest to love. Our love must extend to places and to people where love is absent, where faith in love has faded or died.

We are called to take the Love of God to those who cannot accept it, to people less fortunate than we are; to life's casualties, to those who have lost hope – not just to tell them an unbelievable message, but, by our own lives and our own actions, to show them that it is true. If we don't live it, why should anybody believe us?

It is God who takes the initiative. God reaches out to us in love – because God is Love.

God, who still allows us to choose whether or not to respond.

Amen. Soli Deo Gloria.

Hymn 189 Be Still

Prayer for Others and Blessing

Today, although we are in separate places, let's try using Responses. At the words:

L: *Lord, as you abide in us, you may like to join with **may we abide in you.***

Loving God,
we pray for your church, in this place, and throughout the world.
May it be a caring, loving and accepting church, reaching out to your people,
and to the needy, the outcast, the rejected;
that love may be revealed in action.
Helper of the helpless,
reach out to those in trouble
who need help in time of storm or flood, pestilence or natural disaster;
thinking especially of the victims of the eruption in St. Vincent;
storms, earthquakes and wildfires in many places.

L: Lord, as you abide in us,

ALL: **may we abide in you.**

We pray for all who have been denied freedom or peace:

those afflicted by war, terrorism, oppression, injustice.

We pray for all who suffer because of Covid:

the sick, the dying; the anxious, the grieving;

those who have lost income or means of livelihood.

We think especially of the desperate situation in India.

May governments who have an excess of medicines and oxygen be moved to generosity,
and may those facing great anguish find comfort.

L: Lord, as you abide in us,

ALL: **may we abide in you.**

We pray for places where communities have been destroyed,

families divided and separated,

people uprooted by prejudice and oppression;

for children who have lost contact with their parents.

We remember all who seek to heal divisions.

L: Lord, as you abide in us,

ALL: **may we abide in you.**

Gracious God, we pray for those denied opportunity to grow and to bear fruit;

stunted by abuse and violence; bruised by criticism and bullying;

those whose hopes and dreams have been callously cast aside.

We pray for our families and friends, bringing to you especially
those for whom we have particular concerns today.

Pause

L: Lord, as you abide in us,

ALL: may we abide in you.

Lord of life and love,

We praise you for all who have borne fruit in your service,

all who have advanced your kingdom, those who have shared their love and goodness,
remembering with thanksgiving those dear to us who are now in your keeping.

L: Lord, as you abide in us,

ALL: may we abide in you.

Now may you stay safe in the ways of Christ,

bearing fruit in the service of the God in whom we live and move and have our being;

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.