

ORPHIR and STENNESS CHURCH
ZOOM: Service 14.03.21; Lent4B

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Introduction and Prayer:

Good morning, wherever you are.

It's good to speak to you again.

"We may not all be gathered in the same building, but at this time, when we need each other so much, we are invited to worship together, from where we are – knowing that God can hear us all and can blend even distant voices into one song of worship."

National Worship Team

Today we think about one of the best-known verses in the New Testament.

First, a Prayer:

As this day and this week unfold, and present us with their challenges, may we face them with confidence, knowing you are with us in our daily labour, a constant help, our strength and joy. Amen.

Hymn 251 I the Lord of Sea and Sky

I, The Lord Of Sea And Sky,
I Have Heard My People Cry.
All Who Dwell In Dark And Sin,
My Hand Will Save.
I Who Made The Stars Of Night,
I Will Make Their Darkness Bright.
Who Will Bear My Light To Them?
Whom Shall I Send?

Here I Am Lord, Is It I, Lord?
I Have Heard You Calling In The Night.
I Will Go Lord, If You Lead Me.
I Will Hold Your People In My Heart.

I, The Lord Of Snow And Rain,
I Have Borne My People's Pain.
I Have Wept For Love Of Them, They Turn Away.
I Will Break Their Hearts Of Stone,
Give Them Hearts For Love Alone.
I Will Speak My Word To Them
Whom Shall I Send?

Here I Am Lord, Is It I, Lord?
I Have Heard You Calling In The Night.
I Will Go Lord, If You Lead Me.
I Will Hold Your People In My Heart.

Opening Prayer and Lord's Prayer

By his grace,
our eternal and ever-blessed God has gathered us today,
at this time, but in our separate places,
and we give thanks that, together, we can hear his word,
offer our prayers, and respond to his gospel.

May our minds be enlightened by his truth,
our hearts warmed with his love,
our lives so empowered by his grace,
that, especially in these anxious times,
we may indeed love God, and love our neighbours as ourselves.

With regret, we remember broken promises;
resolutions harder to keep than we expected, because we didn't count the cost;
promises made, and quickly forgotten;
things left half-done, or perhaps not attempted;
things we put off from day to day until they fade into forgetfulness

We reflect that maybe we could have – should have - done more
with the talents that God has given us.
Perhaps we might have worked harder to turn dreams into reality.
May we make better use of the time that still remains to us,
that, some day, we may hear the words,
"Well done, good and faithful servant."

Especially in these strange times,
when what we accepted as normal life has been disrupted by restrictions,
may we find in God, and in his Son Jesus Christ,
strength to bear our anxieties and burdens, and not to faint or fall;
faith to walk with Jesus on our journey through Lent,
and every day of our lives, until we reach our journey's end.

In his name we ask all our prayers, and in his 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: Olivia:

1st Reading: Ephesians 2: 1-10 (NRSVA): From Death to Life

You were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient. All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else. But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the

heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness towards us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

Hymn Jesus is Lord

Jesus Is Lord! Creation's Voice Proclaims It,
For By His Power Each Tree And Flower
Was Planned And Made.

Jesus Is Lord! The Universe Declares It,
Sun, Moon And Stars In Heaven
Cry, 'Jesus Is Lord!'

Jesus Is Lord! Jesus Is Lord!
Praise Him With Hallelujahs
For Jesus Is Lord!

Jesus Is Lord! Yet From His Throne Eternal
In Flesh He Came To Die In Pain
On Calvary's Tree.
Jesus Is Lord! From Him All Life Proceeding,
Yet Gave His Life A Ransom
Thus Setting Us Free.

Jesus Is Lord! Jesus Is Lord!
Praise Him With Hallelujahs
For Jesus Is Lord!

Jesus Is Lord! O'er Sin The Mighty Conqueror,
From Death He Rose, And All His Foes
Shall Own His Name.
Jesus Is Lord! God Sent His Holy Spirit
To Show By Works Of Power
That Jesus Is Lord.

Jesus Is Lord! Jesus Is Lord!
Praise Him With Hallelujahs
For Jesus Is Lord!

2nd Reading: John 3: 14-21 (NRSVA):

[And] Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

'For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

'Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those

who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgement, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.'

For the word of God in scripture, for the word of God among us, for the word of God within us, thanks be to God.

Message:

Our reading from John's gospel starts with a parable, a story in Numbers 21. Because of all the grumbling of the Israelites in the wilderness, God sent a plague of snakes to bite them. When they repented, they were healed of the snake bites by looking at the bronze serpent Moses made and raised in front of them. In the same way, when Jesus is lifted up on the cross and people see and believe in him, they will find eternal life.

Then comes what is probably the best-known verse in the New Testament, yet maybe so well-known that we have stopped registering the huge significance of these words:

God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

There are deep theological thoughts here, but we'll leave them for another time. I have been thinking, again, about what this passage means to me.

God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son.

Not loved a nation, or the church, or the good people, or any particular group. *Everybody*. Think of that next time you are angry with someone: God loved that person so much that he gave his only Son.

Think about it next time you are feeling depressed or discouraged: God loved *me* so much that he gave his only Son.

While we are about it, notice that God loved *the world*: not just the people in it – the whole of nature – the animals, the forests, the plants

And why?

"So that whoever believes in him may not be lost, but have eternal life"

The offer is there. The invitation to believe, to renew your belief, to be born again from above. The initiative comes from God.

Sometimes people present the Christian message in a way that shows God as a stern angry, unforgiving God, and a gentle, loving, forgiving Jesus. But this text tells us that it all *started* with God. Why? God gave his son, because he loved the world.

Not because he was angry or wanted to punish people or teach them a lesson: because he loved.

Behind everything is the LOVE of God. Here is God acting, not for God's sake, but for our sake, not to force us to obey, but because he "so loved the world."

I think it was Billy Graham who said:

In other religions, the human race seeks to find God — but in Christianity God seeks to find us.

This is the God who takes the initiative. In the story of the Prodigal Son, this is the Father who sees his returning son in the distance. Why? Because he had been constantly looking out for him. Runs to him. Sweeps aside the carefully rehearsed apology. Welcomes him home.

How does God love the world?
so much that he gave his only Son

This does not refer to Jesus's death on the cross as substitutionary atonement for sin: it refers to the *incarnation as a whole*. God loves the world so much that God, made flesh in Jesus, became part of it, vulnerable to it, partaking of it. To love the world means to love the world as God, in Jesus, loved the world: enough to give his life for it.

And why?

... so that whoever believes in him may not be lost ...

Our word "believe" has changed over time, and has come to mean believing a set of statements or claims. The Greek word used here means believing *in* God's son, not believing doctrines *about* him. A better word might be "Beloving".

Believing in Jesus means giving him commitment, loyalty, faithfulness, trust - giving your whole life to him. That is what we, as Christians, profess to do. *Isn't it?*

... may not be lost, but have eternal life.

The Greek words translated "eternal life" don't mean an afterlife, but rather "the life of the age to come."

Not some kind of unlimited extension of our everyday existence (I don't think many of us would want that!) but rather a new quality of life, begun *here and now* through faith, which is consummated and fulfilled through resurrection.

This eternal life is only made possible through the love of God, and the love of God is shown in the astonishing fact that God loves his world so much that his only son will die for it. We can experience the age to come by centring in God as shown to us in Jesus, Jesus the "resurrection and the life."

John tells us that, in his prayer for his disciples, Jesus says:

This is eternal life: that people know you, the only true God, and that they know Jesus Christ, the One you sent. (John 17:3: NCV)

Luke tells us that Jesus said: The kingdom of God is among you. (or within you) (NRSV) (Luke 17:21)

The kingdom of God is among us in the here and now!

I *do* believe that death is not the end.

But if we take eternal life to mean only life after death, then that means that Jesus's message is mainly about the afterlife – all about going to heaven – and I think Jesus makes a huge difference to our lives here and now.

Remember his amazing promise:

"I came to give life—life in all its fullness" (John 10:10; NCV)

The take-home message for us today?

God loved the world. Everybody.

Think of that next time you are angry or depressed or discouraged. God loved us all so much that he gave his only Son.

And why? "So that everyone who believes in him may not die but have eternal life."

The invitation is there: to believe, to renew your faith, to be born again from above. The initiative comes from the God who reaches out to us in love, who loves each one of us as if there were only one of us to love.

The God who still allows us to choose whether or not to respond.
Amen. Soli Deo Gloria

Hymn 96 You are before me God

You are before me, Lord, You are behind.
And over me You have spread out Your hand;
Such knowledge is too wonderful for me,
Too high to grasp, too great to understand.

If I should take my flight into the dawn,
If I should dwell on ocean's farthest shore,
Your mighty hand will rest upon me still,
And Your right hand will guard me evermore.

If I should say, "Let darkness cover me,
And I shall hide within the veil of night,"
Surely the darkness is not dark to You;
The night is as the day, the darkness light.

Search me, O God, search me and know my heart;
Try me, O God, my mind and spirit try;
Keep me from any path that gives You pain,
And lead me in the everlasting way.

Prayer for Others and Blessing

We pray for the world and its people:
for all who are suffering, or in any kind of need.
We pray for those suffering because of natural disasters,
and for people affected by war or terrorism, oppression or exploitation,
in Myanmar, Mozambique, in Yemen, Syria, China, and in many other places.

We pray for those who have missed, or have forgotten, the call of Christ:
those looking in the wrong direction; those living in the past,
trapped in nostalgia, fearing that all the good times lie far behind.

We pray for those whose whole horizon has been darkened by sorrow,
convinced that the sun has set on their hopes and dreams;
and for those who have allowed some disappointment to sour them,
rather than let them grow;
those who have allowed a quarrel to create a gulf they feel they cannot bridge.

We pray for those living in the future, always putting things off until a more convenient time;
those who are waiting, and not working, hoping, but not striving;
and for those who have mistaken dreams for deeds.

We pray for those who think of their worries and problems, but never think to turn to God;

thinking of all they might lose, but not of all the things that can never be taken from them; those conscious of their weakness, yet forgetting the all-sufficient grace of God.

We pray for people who are ill or in pain, in hospitals or at home, especially, at this time, all those in any way affected by Covid-19; and those on the long journey back to health.

We pray for those who know that there is no healing for them, that they may live out their remaining time in courage and with faith.

We pray for medical teams and all who minister to the sick, and for people grieving for loved ones.

Throughout the disease-control restrictions we pray for all who are lonely, especially those suffering from dementia or from mental health problems. May they have the support, understanding and compassion that they need.

In quietness we bring our own special and private concerns to God.

Pause

*In the silence I feel his presence;
in the silence I place my problems in his hands.*

Pause

Whatever your situation, whatever your need,
may you walk in the ways of Christ,
may you find in him
a home within the wilderness,
a rest upon the way,
a rock on which you can build, and rebuild, your lives;
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.