

ORPHIR and STENNESS CHURCH
Transcript Zoom Service Sunday 17th. January 2021; Epiph. 2B

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Introduction & Prayer

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

Today we hear about two friends who have an unexpected encounter with Jesus, and initially react in very different ways. Together, Philip and Nathanael help each other to understand who Jesus is, and they begin a journey that will redefine who they are.

Nathanael is surprised that Jesus knows his name, and so much about him. Jesus knows each of us as individuals but, like Nathanael, sometimes, we can wonder, 'Why would God be interested in me?' This story tells us that, wherever we are, Jesus finds us, and knows us. Are we listening, and looking out for him – and helping others to do the same? Today we think about how we help one another to hear God.

A prayer:

Eternal God, present among us, as you are with us in our gathering,
you are with us also in our distancing.
Hear our prayers, blend our voices together, unite us by Your Spirit. Amen

Hy 502 Take my life, Lord let it be consecrated

Opening Prayer

Lord, you have examined me, and you know all about me.

God of abiding love,
you are present in all our beginnings, acquainted with all of our ways;
you are intricately woven into the depths of all things.
We know that nothing is hidden from you.
You understand our thoughts from far off, and know our ways intimately;
you know the people we are created to be.

We thank you for the blessings of relationships with families and friends,
and for all those people you have placed in our lives who have influenced us for good.
Above all, we thank you for our relationship with you,
and for the knowledge that, in all our hurts, our worries, our uncertainties,
we can come to you for your guidance and reassurance.

In these anxious times, we ask your help in doing all that we can
to protect others and ourselves, and to help stop the spread of the Covid infection.

In all things may we be renewed and uplifted by your presence in our lives.
We bring our prayers in the name of Jesus Christ, to whom,
with you and the Holy Spirit, be all glory, thanks and praise,
and in whose words we pray:
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.

Reading 1:

Psalm 139:1-18 (NCV): God Knows Everything:

Lord, you have examined me and know all about me.
You know when I sit down and when I get up.
You know my thoughts before I think them.
You know where I go and where I lie down.
You know everything I do.
Lord, even before I say a word, you already know it.

You are all around me—in front and in back—
and have put your hand on me.
Your knowledge is amazing to me; it is more than I can understand.

Where can I go to get away from your Spirit?
Where can I run from you?
If I go up to the heavens, you are there.
If I lie down in the grave, you are there.
If I rise with the sun in the east
and settle in the west beyond the sea,
even there you would guide me.
With your right hand you would hold me.

I could say, "The darkness will hide me.
Let the light around me turn into night."
But even the darkness is not dark to you.
The night is as light as the day;
darkness and light are the same to you.

You made my whole being;
you formed me in my mother's body.
I praise you because you made me in an amazing and wonderful way.
What you have done is wonderful.
I know this very well.

You saw my bones being formed
as I took shape in my mother's body.
When I was put together there,
you saw my body as it was formed.
All the days planned for me were written in your book
before I was one day old.

God, your thoughts are precious to me.
They are so many!
If I could count them, they would be more than all the grains of sand.
When I wake up, I am still with you.

Hymn 601 Look upon us, blessed Lord

Reading 2:

John 1:43-51 (NRSV): Jesus Calls Philip and Nathanael

The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, 'Follow me.'
Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. Philip found Nathanael and said to him, 'We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth.'
Nathanael said to him, 'Can anything good come out of Nazareth?' Philip said to him, 'Come and see.'

When Jesus saw Nathanael coming towards him, he said of him, 'Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!' Nathanael asked him, 'Where did you come to know me?' Jesus answered, 'I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you.' Nathanael replied, 'Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!' Jesus answered, 'Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these.' And he said to him, 'Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.'

Message:

The small-town mentality:

'Can anything good come out of Nazareth?' Nathanael, from Cana, a rival village, was quite ready to sneer at Nazareth.

It's like saying, can anything good come out of Orphir, or Stenness?

Yes: Dr. John Rae; Margaret Graham, the nurse and missionary; Col Sir Robert MacRae – you can fill in the list better than I can!

We don't know much about Nathanael, but here's a man who was sceptical, even scornful, about Jesus, and who rapidly changed his mind.

Earlier in the passage that Peter read, we hear John the Baptist testifying that Jesus is the Lamb of God, who will take away the sin of the world, and instructing his own disciples to go and follow Jesus. Some of them did, including Andrew, and his brother Peter. Now Jesus comes to Galilee and finds Philip, and invites him: "*Follow me*".

Not only does Philip follow, he looks for Nathanael, and invites him to do the same.

Nathanael is contemptuous, but Philip doesn't argue: "*Come and see.*"

Not many people are *argued* into Christianity. Arguments often do more harm than good. Better to live our lives in a way that reflects the faith that we profess:

"Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven".

Come and see: warm, friendly, words. The heart of John's Gospel, the heart of Christian outreach: words that tell us not to try to ram our faith down people's throats, or threaten them with hellfire, but instead, to offer a straight-forward invitation to come and see what God has done - and is still doing - through Jesus and all who have chosen to follow him.

A simple, non-threatening invitation, but I wonder how many Christian people have ever made it, or something like it; whether any of *us* ever say these words, not only to people who come to church, but to folks we meet in our daily lives.

Many church buildings are closed at present, but Christian worship and fellowship continue in other ways. This is a time to consider not only how best to keep our congregation together, but also what we can do to help in the community, and attract people to join us.

Many folk would agree that what influences people to attend church for the first time, or to come back after an absence, is a personal invitation. It's not the church building, or the style of worship, or the music; not even the brilliant preaching of the minister. Those things are important, but the main reason people give for coming to church for the first time is that someone invited them personally. Just as Philip approached Nathanael, someone says: "*Come and see.*"

When, eventually, we do get back to 'normal', the future of the church may well depend on ordinary, everyday Christians gathering their courage and inviting someone to *come and see* what they have found in the community they call their congregation, and in the wider

fellowship of the church in the world. Or approaching someone who used to come, but no longer does, with a friendly, no-pressure invitation.

This assumes that people really *have* found something that's important to them at church, and that they are able to describe what it is, and to share it.

So – ask yourselves:

What's your favourite thing, the thing you most miss during lockdown, about the life we share in this faith community of Orphir and Stenness?

And how about inviting someone you know to share these things? *Come and see.*

The next few months, and years, will be a critical time for the church. There will certainly be changes.

We keep being told that many people are moving away from the church, some saying that the church has no relevance in their lifestyles. Now some people may see the temporary closure of church buildings as an excuse to drift away. It is up to folk like us to show that the church, the Christian way of life, really is relevant to all people in all times and circumstances.

What *have* we found in our Christian fellowship, our Christian way of life?

Not only fellowship with one another, and with Christian people throughout the entire world.

We have entered into a personal relationship with the man who said:

"Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest."

the man who said:

"I have come in order that you might have life — life in all its fullness".

Through this man Jesus Christ we enter into a relationship with the God who is all around us and within us.

In the Psalm Susan read this morning:

Where can I go to get away from your Spirit?

Where can I run from you?

If I go up to the heavens, you are there.

If I lie down in the grave, you are there.

If I rise with the sun in the east

and settle in the west beyond the sea,

even there you would guide me.

With your right hand you would hold me.

God all around us; God the air we breathe, the ocean in which we swim, the God in whom we live and move and have our being.

The future of the church is ultimately in God's hands. But we are the hands and the voice of God in this place. God delegates the job to us.

As Billy Graham said:

"We are the Bibles the world is reading; we are the creeds the world is needing; we are the sermons the world is heeding."

That same Spirit who descended on Jesus at Baptism, who came to us at our own baptism, or confirmation, who comes to us in the Lord's Supper, and maybe at other times, is still working among us.

The Spirit that inspired Philip and Andrew to reach out to others, the Spirit who overcame Nathanael's scepticism, is still offering all kinds of people all over the world an invitation to "come and see" - and still creating in them the desire to do just that.

We need to ensure that, when they come, there will be something worthwhile to see.

Even in these worrying times, God is working in and through every one of us for the nurture, care, and growth of His people and His church.

A prayer:

Come, Holy Spirit, that we may see and taste the grace of God afresh.

Come, Holy Spirit, that we may share the grace of God with others.

Come, Holy Spirit, that we may bear witness with our whole lives to the grace of God made manifest and available to us in Jesus. Amen.

Hymn 543 Longing for Light, we wait in darkness

Concluding Prayer and Blessing: Let us pray:

We bring to God our prayers for the world.

Amidst troubles and uncertainties of many kinds, and in many places, we pray for all those whose decisions affect the lives of others.

Wherever there is division in human relationships, may there be an end to hatred and confrontation. By the grace of God, may there be an end to intolerance and discrimination of every kind. May people and nations learn to respect one another, so that differences may be resolved peacefully, and for the benefit of all.

We pray that the states of America may indeed be united in the days and weeks ahead. We pray for wisdom and protection for the President-elect, and for all who will shortly take office. We pray for those threatening to cause disruption, and for all those entrusted with maintaining law and order

We pray for a peaceful world, where security rests on trust, not on threats; where nations fight against poverty rather than against one another. May all in authority be guided by truth and justice, and act with wisdom and integrity, that the will of God may indeed be done on earth as it is in heaven.

We pray for all in any way affected by the Pandemic: all who are ill, and those who treat them, care for them, worry, or weep for them; and all who work to produce and administer vaccines, that this cruel disease may be brought to an end.

We bring before God all those for whom we have special concerns, and whom we carry in our minds and hearts today.

Pause

May we all know the loving support of family and friends, near and far, and the power of Christ to encourage and sustain us.

In his name we bring all our prayers. Amen.

Now may you stay safe in the way of Christ.

May he go with you into the world; may he go before you in all you do.

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.