

ORPHIR and STENNESS CHURCH

ZOOM Service Sunday 31st January 2021; Epiphany 4B

Introduction and Prayer: Martin:

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

"We are not gathered in one 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."

Last week we read in St. Mark's Gospel how Jesus recruited his disciples. Now he tells us about the beginning of Jesus' active ministry.

A Prayer:

Happy and blessed are those who walk in wisdom.

In reverence and worship let us seek the authority and wisdom of God. Amen.

Hymn 167 Guide me O thy great Jehovah

Guide me, O Thou great Jehovah,
Pilgrim through this barren land;
I am weak, but Thou art mighty,
Hold me with Thy pow'ful hand.
Bread of heaven, Bread of heaven,
Feed me till my want is o'er;
Feed me till my want is o'er;

Open now the crystal fountain,
Whence the healing stream doth flow;
Let the fire and cloudy pillar
Lead me all my journey through.
Strong Deliverer, strong Deliverer,
Be Thou still my Strength and Shield;
Be Thou still my Strength and Shield.

When I tread the verge of Jordan,
Bid my anxious fears subside;
Death of death and hell's Destruction,
Land me safe on Canaan's side.
Songs of praises, songs of praises,
I will ever give to Thee;
I will ever give to Thee.

Opening Prayer & Lord's Prayer

Wherever we are, in this special time,
may God show us why it is special, and reveal to us its special qualities -
a time tingling with gladness, that brings us face to face with mystery;
a time for letting go, and for reaching out beyond ourselves.

We live in strange and anxious circumstances.

In the face of the Covid pandemic, we worry about those dear to us, and about ourselves.
Life lays urgent claims upon us; we are confused by difficult choices; we compromise;
we fall short of our own ideals;
we are discouraged by all the troubles around us,
and we seek the comfort and reassurance of God's renewing power.

May His boundless love reach out to us again, and capture us, and keep us.
May we find in this brief time whatever we need on our personal journey.

We pray that the Gospel of the costly life and death and resurrection
of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ may break through our defences and reach our hearts,
so that those who meet us in our daily lives may see in us
neither a contradiction nor a denial of Him we seek to serve,
but a life consistent and in harmony, the life of those who hear good news
and take it home with them, and take it seriously.

In the week ahead may we have the faith
to entrust ourselves and those we love into his care.

We bring all our prayers in the name of Jesus, who taught us to 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: Willie Buchan will read for us:

1st Reading: Psalm 111 (NRSVA): Praise for God's Wonderful Works

Praise the Lord!
I will give thanks to the Lord with my whole heart,
in the company of the upright, in the congregation.
Great are the works of the Lord,
studied by all who delight in them.
Full of honour and majesty is his work,
and his righteousness endures for ever.
He has gained renown by his wonderful deeds;
the Lord is gracious and merciful.
He provides food for those who fear him;
he is ever mindful of his covenant.
He has shown his people the power of his works,
in giving them the heritage of the nations.
The works of his hands are faithful and just;
all his precepts are trustworthy.
They are established for ever and ever,
to be performed with faithfulness and uprightness.
He sent redemption to his people;
he has commanded his covenant for ever.
Holy and awesome is his name.
The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom;
all those who practise it have a good understanding.
His praise endures for ever.

Hymn 556 I need Thee every hour

1 I need Thee ev'ry hour,
Most gracious Lord;
No tender voice like Thine
Can peace afford.

Refrain:

I need Thee, oh, I need Thee;
Ev'ry hour I need Thee;
Oh, bless me now, my Savior,
I come to Thee.

2 I need Thee ev'ry hour,
Stay Thou nearby;

Temptations lose their pow'r
When Thou art nigh. *[Refrain]*

3 I need Thee ev'ry hour,
In joy or pain;
Come quickly and abide,
Or life is vain. *[Refrain]*

4 I need Thee ev'ry hour,
Teach me Thy will;
And Thy rich promises
In me fulfill. *[Refrain]*

2nd Reading: **Mark 1:21-28 (NRSVA): The Man with an Unclean Spirit**

They went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, and he cried out, 'What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God.' But Jesus rebuked him, saying, 'Be silent, and come out of him!' And the unclean spirit, throwing him into convulsions and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, 'What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.' At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

Amen. 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

Imagine an ordinary Sunday, like they used to be. You're sitting in Orphir Kirk, or any other church. The minister, or leader, is well into the sermon. You're concentrating on what he or she is saying, or maybe thinking about what you'll have for dinner.

Suddenly a man in the congregation jumps to his feet, shouting - swearing maybe: "*What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God.*"

The Preacher says: "Be quiet! Get out of him!" The man goes into a kind of convulsion, then he is quiet; maybe gets up from the floor and sits down again; maybe walks quietly out of the church.

How would the congregation react? How would *you* react? Sit there in shocked silence? Fall on your knees in prayer? Bolt for the door?

I don't think you would say to your neighbour, "*Goodness, how remarkable! Is this some new kind of teaching?*"

But that's what happened that day in Capernaum. In Mark's story, the congregation has just witnessed a scene like something out of *The Exorcist*, yet their response is: "What's this? A new teaching?"

A new teaching indeed, and so much more!

These people had become so obsessed with routine observance of the rules and regulations of their religion that they had forgotten what it was all about. Only the Unclean Spirit recognises Jesus for who he is: the Holy One of God.

However we may speculate as to what medical or psychiatric condition was affecting him, Jesus saw a tortured soul, and he brought healing – freedom – in an immediate, unexpected, unconventional way.

"A new kind of teaching!"

I wonder what kind of teaching these folk were used to. Was it so dull and boring that they had come to see everything in terms of their rules and regulations? Maybe there's more than a remnant of these attitudes in the church even in the 21st Century. The "aye been" mentality that is suspicious of new ideas, and shies away from anything out of the ordinary.

Our faith is – or should be - continually changing and evolving. It has to develop in response to the changes and the evolution in the world around us, and in the light of new understanding. That is healthy.

I don't believe that God spoke to a few people, thousands of years ago, and then stopped. I believe that God has continued to speak to us. He speaks through the present-day prophets: the people who have developed ever more sophisticated surgery to address conditions thought to be incurable; the people who continue to develop new medicines to cope with cancer – and I'm one of the beneficiaries; the scientists who warn about our misuse of the world; the prophets of our time – Greta Thunberg and many others like her, who warn about global warming and climate change; scientists and medical people at this moment producing vaccines, and developing ways of coping with the Covid pandemic; Ministers and church leaders finding new ways to reach out to the people while many of our church buildings are closed to us.

God is still speaking to us if we have the humility to listen: *if we have ears to hear.*

This is a challenging time for the church in the world: a challenging time for the church in Orkney.

When, eventually – and we pray that it may be soon – the Pandemic is brought under control, and our churches reopen, it may be that the people will return in droves to give thanks. Or maybe many will have found other things to do, and will not return. but join those who tell you frankly that they find nothing in the Church of Scotland that is of relevance to them in their lives today.

Our faith, our attitudes, our outlook, must rise to meet changes and challenges. We need to show people that the Church, the Christian fellowship, has something for everybody.

A new kind of teaching.

The last verse of Psalm 111 reads:

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.

"The fear of the Lord."

The Hebrew word translated here as "fear" really means *reverence*. To *fear* is to pay reverence to, cling to, or to serve; to respect - even to love.

What is meant here is:

"Reverence for the Lord is the beginning of wisdom."

It's not fear! Jesus Christ did not come to bring fear. The Jesus that we find in the New Testament is the embodiment of love, of concern for ordinary people.

A love that could be blistering in deploring pride and hypocrisy, yet a love that wept at the tomb of Lazarus;

a love that refused to condemn the woman taken in adultery; a love that condemned the sin without condemning the sinner.

The love - *compassion* - that reached out to that man in the synagogue in Capernaum.

That's what God is like! We know - because Jesus told us!

"Whoever has seen me has seen the Father." (John 14:9).

Over the years I have moved away from the idea of God as a remote, stern old man, up in the clouds, who may answer your prayers if you're good, but will certainly punish you if you're not. I prefer the more enlightened, more realistic, more refreshing concepts of God:

the God in whom we live and move and have our being, as Paul reminds us: (Acts 17:28).

God the air that we breathe, God the ocean in which we swim.

Jesus certainly brought a new kind of teaching. New teaching that would bring him into deadly conflict with the worldly authorities, who represented the old teaching. New teaching, and a claim to act on divine authority, that would lead to his death.

A new teaching. But much more.

Jesus's authority, his ministry, his example, show us not only a new teaching, *but a whole new way of life*.

In the early days of the Church, the Christian faith was known simply as "*The Way*."

Jesus came that we may have life, life in all its fullness.

Jesus invites us to look to the reality of a different world - and to live towards it.

How would we have responded that day in Capernaum?

How do we respond today? Amen.

Hymn 533 Will you come and follow me

Will you come and follow me if I but call your name?

Will you go where you don't know and never be the same?

Will you let my love be shown?

Will you let my name be known?

Will you let my life be grown in you, and you in me?

Will you leave yourself behind if I but call your name?

Will you care for cruel and kind and never be the same?

Will you risk the hostile stare, should your life attract or scare?
Will you let me answer prayer in you and you in me?

Will you let the blinded man see if I but call your name?
Will you set the prisoners free and never be the same?

Will you kiss the leper clean, and do such as this unseen?
And admit to what I mean in you, and you in me?

Will you love the "you" you hide if I but call
your name?
Will you quell that fear inside and never be
the same?
Will you use the faith you've found
to reshape the world around
through my sight and touch and sound in you,
and you in me?

Lord, your summons echoes true when you
but call my name.
Let me turn and follow you and never be the
same.
In your company I'll go,
where your love and footsteps show,
thus I'll move and live and grow in you,
and you in me.

Prayer for Others and Blessing

Let us pray.

Let us bring to God our prayers for the world and its peoples.
We pray for the leaders, of our nation, and of all nations.
In the exercise of their authority may they be wise, just and compassionate.
Where there is oppression and protest, may there be justice and reconciliation.

In the face of the many challenges of the Pandemic, we remember
the government in the Netherlands, the new government in the United States,
and all who decide policy in the United Kingdom.
May they have wisdom to discern what is best for all.

We pray that vaccine production and distribution will proceed efficiently and fairly.
We pray for those who mistrust the vaccine, and for those for whom it has come too late.
We pray for people suffering from Covid 19;
for their families and friends, especially those in Orkney, or known to us.

We pray for medical teams working under extreme pressure;
for the dying and the bereaved, and for all those who minister to them.

May God strengthen and uphold those who feel overwhelmed by the additional pressures of
home schooling, and encourage and support young people who fear that their education and
their future may be at risk.

We pray for those who find their relationships stretched to breaking point;
for lives blighted by anxiety, and stress, and depression;
for their families and friends, and for health services and charities trying to support them.

We pray for the Church, around the world, and in our own country and community.
May we find creative ways to serve and to share;
find faith and courage and integrity as we listen and pray;
and guidance and compassion as we respond to the needs around us.

In a moment of silence, we bring to God our concerns for all those we carry
in our hearts and minds today.

Pause

We pray also for all those people who have no one to name them in prayer.

For ourselves we ask renewal of our faith in God,
and patience and trust to follow the advice of our medical and scientific advisers.
In Jesus' name. Amen.

As you enter this new week, may you stay safe in the way of Christ;
may you find him in every situation,
draw upon his strength, and follow in his example.
And the blessing of God almighty,

the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit,
be with you, and remain with you, now and evermore. Amen.