

**ORPHIR and STENNESS CHURCH**  
**Handout Service for 02.08.20; Prop13A**

**Introduction:**

In the present circumstances of the Coronavirus pandemic, when we are unable to hold our Church services, we think of other Christian people 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. God bless you all.

**Gathering Words and Prayer**

Our readings today remind us that, however needy and tired we may feel, God is ready to meet us with love and compassion. We may feel that our resources are weak and inadequate, but if we are willing to offer and share what we have, we will find that God's provision is generous and abundant. Let us trust in the gifts of God's grace.

Let us take a moment of quietness, to think about how we are feeling at this time, to know the presence of God among us, and to seek his strength and his blessing.

**Pause**

Loving God,  
you look deep inside us. You see not only our outer but our inner needs. Feed us today from your holy word, and we will be filled. 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): 160** Praise, my soul, the king of Heaven

**Opening Prayer and Lord's Prayer**

To the God who nurtures and feeds us  
we come from our daily routine  
bringing our weariness, our hunger for his strengthening word,  
bringing our pains and griefs that long for his healing.  
We bring too our awareness of the world's need.  
May we find in our meeting with him renewed strength for living  
and courage to share the gifts of his love with a needy world.

Our generous God offers us so much,  
yet often we treat his gifts selfishly or lightly.  
Distracted by things of no importance,  
we overlook the riches of his gospel,  
clinging tightly to what we have, reluctant to share with others.  
Uncertain and anxious, we do not trust him to meet our needs.

Yet, secure in the forgiveness of our faithful God,  
we seek his help to value all his gifts,  
to share freely with others, and to live in joyful risk for his kingdom.

In a world where there is so much hunger and thirst, we offer thanks for his generosity,  
for our abundance of wholesome food, for the refreshment of cool drinks,  
for the welcome at his table.

We bring thanks to the God who meets us in our joyful times,  
and also when we are tired and weary, never sending us away empty;  
thanks that, by his grace, there is always enough, and our cup overflows.  
We praise the God whose provision never runs out,  
and who is always ready to meet us  
in the love so wonderfully expressed in his Son, our Saviour, Jesus Christ our Lord.  
In his words we pray, 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): 501** Take this moment, sign, and space

**Readings:**

**Isaiah 55:1-5 (NRSVA):** *An Invitation to Abundant Life*

Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters;  
and you that have no money, come, buy and eat!  
Come, buy wine and milk, without money and without price.  
Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread,  
and your labour for that which does not satisfy?  
Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good,  
and delight yourselves in rich food.

Incline your ear, and come to me;  
listen, so that you may live.  
I will make with you an everlasting covenant,  
my steadfast, sure love for David.  
See, I made him a witness to the peoples,  
a leader and commander for the peoples.  
See, you shall call nations that you do not know,  
and nations that do not know you shall run to you,  
because of the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel,  
for he has glorified you.

**Psalm 145: 8-9; 14-21 (NRSVA)**

The Lord is gracious and merciful,  
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.  
The Lord is good to all,  
and his compassion is over all that he has made.

*and at v. 14:*

The Lord upholds all who are falling,  
and raises up all who are bowed down.  
The eyes of all look to you,  
and you give them their food in due season.  
You open your hand,  
satisfying the desire of every living thing.  
The Lord is just in all his ways,  
and kind in all his doings.  
The Lord is near to all who call on him,  
to all who call on him in truth.  
He fulfils the desire of all who fear him;  
he also hears their cry, and saves them.

The Lord watches over all who love him,  
but all the wicked he will destroy.

My mouth will speak the praise of the Lord,  
and all flesh will bless his holy name for ever and ever.

**Hymn (3): 717** O Christ, the healer, we have come

**Gospel Reading: Matt: 14:13-21 (NRSVA): *Feeding the Five Thousand***

Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns. When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick. When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, 'This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves.' Jesus said to them, 'They need not go away; you give them something to eat.' They replied, 'We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish.' And he said, 'Bring them here to me.' Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.

**Message**

The Psalmist tells us:  
The Lord is gracious and merciful,  
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.  
The Lord is good to all,  
and his compassion is over all that he has made.

He fulfils the desire of all who fear him;  
he also hears their cry, and saves them.  
The Lord watches over all who love him,  
but all the wicked he will destroy.

Does he really?

We have watched the development of a new disease that has affected 15.5 million and killed over 633,000 worldwide, with nearly 46,000 deaths in UK, 2,500 of them in Scotland.

There have been protests and disturbances in several parts of the country following police attempts to get people to comply with Covid control measures.

Peaceful protests following the disgraceful death of George Floyd in have escalated into full-scale riots in many parts of America. Riots in India, Hong Kong and many other places.

After 10 years of unbelievable stress and misery for the parents in a case that has shocked and perplexed the world, there seems to be a breakthrough in the case Madeleine McCann, the little girl who went missing in Portugal.

Recent anniversaries of events in two world wars remind us of the horrors of war. In Germany the guilty verdict on a 93-year-old former Nazi SS concentration camp guard charged with complicity in the murder of more than 5,000 prisoners reminds us, if we need reminding, not only of the Holocaust, but of massacres and 'ethnic cleansing' elsewhere.

The United Nations tell us that Yemen is again facing famine, and that in the coming months hunger will reach devastating levels in at least 25 countries because of the impact of the global COVID-19 pandemic.

The world is a scary place. Radio, television and newspapers continually remind us of tragedy and disasters, brought about by nature, and by men and women. Shootings, stabbings, violence of all kinds. Many of us will remember for all time exactly what we were doing when we heard the news of the Dunblane shooting tragedy in 1996. Before that we had the Hungerford massacre, and since then many more. Many of those responsible claim allegiance to some national or religious group. You may remember 2011, when Anders Behring Breivik killed 77 people in Norway. Breivik declared himself a conservative Christian, and wrote a long manifesto explaining that his motive for his attacks was to start a conflict between Christians and Muslims that would drive Muslims from Europe.

So, is religion behind it all? Is Christianity to blame?

No. Religion is not to blame. Christianity is not to blame. There is all the difference in the world between faith and fanaticism. Yet we cannot ignore the fact certain groups among the religious right in the United States and elsewhere have created an atmosphere of intolerance and fear directed at Muslims.

Where is God in all of this? And where do we stand?

Generations of Christian thinkers have struggled with 'the Problem of Pain'. Why does a good and omnipotent God allow such appalling human suffering? Why did God not intervene to prevent the murder of 6 million Jews? Or to prevent the devastating disasters of recent times – hurricanes and floods, eruptions, earthquakes - that brought horror to our TV screens and – such is human nature – faded quickly from our memory?

Over the years we have had our share of trouble and heartache in our family. So have you. How do we respond?

I have heard of people – Christian people, including pastors, who, confronted by the tragedies of suffering and death have said, "This is the will of God."

But in circumstances where there has been a tragic accident, or where a young person has died much too soon, it seems to me almost blasphemous to say, "This is the will of God."

I cannot believe that it is the direct will of God that anyone should be killed by a drunk driver, or by an Anders Behring Breivik or a Thomas Hamilton or any misguided person. I can't believe that it is the will of God that a mother of a young family should be snatched away by a virulent cancer. I don't believe that these things are all the will of God, part of his mysterious purpose.

When these things happen, I believe that there is no one sorrier than God. Confronted by the death of Lazarus, 'Jesus wept'. And remember, Jesus said, "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father".

I believe that God weeps. I believe that God shares in our tragedy.

There used to be a term used in connection with certain accidents – lightning strike, sudden floods or other natural disasters for example – a term also used in Insurance documents. An 'Act of God'. A legal term for events outside of human control, for which no one can be held responsible. So the floods and earthquakes and eruptions and tsunamis are 'Acts of God'. It has been said that the words 'Act of God' are among the most blasphemous phrases in the English language.

I believe that in these times and these circumstances there is no one more sorry than God that something that should never have happened has happened to his children. I do not believe in a God who stands aside and allows these things to happen, or – much worse – a

God who actively and vindictively makes such things happen, as a punishment, or for reasons known only to him.

In that case, what is the answer? How do we rationalise these things? I don't know. Neither does anybody else, no matter how hard we try.

In his book *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* Rabbi Kushner wrote this:  
*"Human beings live in a world of good and bad and that makes our lives painful and complicated."*

He reminds us that God created humanity with free will, and the freedom to make both good and bad choices. He says, *"If we want to hurt someone, God will not intervene to keep us from doing it. God will not intervene to take away our freedom, including our freedom to hurt ourselves and others around us."*

He tells us,  
*"I have to believe that God was with the victims [of the Holocaust] and that that the tears and prayers of the victims aroused God's compassion. I would like to think that the anguish I feel when I read of the sufferings of innocent people reflects God's anguish and God's compassion...[and] is the source of my being able to feel sympathy and outrage, and that [God] and I are on the same side when we stand with the victims against those who would hurt them."*

We must – I hope we do - stand together with the victims, their families, their friends, their church. The anguish we feel reflects God's anguish. The compassion we feel reflects God's compassion.

Perhaps we don't have the capacity to understand. Jesus doesn't offer any explanations as to why all these things happen, but he does offer us his help and his strength to accept these things that we can't understand.

I know people who reacted to personal tragedy by cutting themselves off from the Church. They blamed God, and have gone through the rest of their lives in bitter resentment – holding a grudge against God. Maybe you know people like that. Understandable, perhaps, but not the way to cope. However difficult it is, the only saving reaction is to go on living, go on working, and to find in the presence of Jesus Christ the strength and courage to carry on in the comfort of the knowledge that God suffers along with us.

Remember what Paul has to say in Romans 8:

*"I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."* (Rom 8:38-39)

What has all this to do with today's reading? If our lesson from St. Matthew's Gospel tells us anything, it tells us above all that **God cares**. Despite his grief and shock over the death of John the Baptist, despite the knowledge that he himself might be the next victim of Herod - another paranoid and deluded individual – despite his exhaustion, *'When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them'*.

But notice that it was not Jesus himself who fed the crowd. He took the pitifully inadequate resources available, and, by his power, made them adequate for the job. Maybe he miraculously increased the quantity. Maybe some of the people there had brought food for themselves, and Jesus shamed them into sharing with others. It doesn't matter.

Nor did Jesus hand out the food. He gave it to the disciples to distribute.

In our times, when Jesus is no longer with us in the flesh, if he wants something done, he needs to get someone to do it. He needs people through whom he can act and speak. He needs people to whom he can give, so that they can give to others. Our job is to be the people that Christ needs. He needs you and me.

The Church is the body of Christ. We are the Church, so let us be the body of Christ, the body which suffers with us, and let us be united in our prayers for our sisters and brothers all over our suffering world, throughout the Pandemic, and in every need.

The smallness of our resources is not a hindrance. Jesus is saying to us, "Come to me as you are, however ill-equipped; bring me what you have, however little, and I will use it greatly in my service."

If we can offer only 50p to famine relief; if we can offer to the people of Yemen or Africa or India only a word of prayer, it doesn't matter. Little is always much in the hands of Christ. His power is far beyond anything that we can understand.

"My mouth will speak the praise of the Lord", says the Psalmist, "and all flesh will bless his holy name for ever and ever".

Amen to that. Soli Deo Gloria.

**(Offering) Hymn (4): 557** O love thou wilt not let me go

**Dedication of Offering:**

Loving Father,  
In the face of poverty, and misery and need throughout the world,  
we are conscious of your generosity towards us,  
for all we have comes from you.  
We offer to you tokens of our work and our prosperity.  
Bless us in the giving, and bless these gifts that they may be used to advance your work in the Church and in the world.  
Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

**Prayers of Intercession**

Father,  
we bring before you the troubles of the world,  
thinking for a few minutes suffering people throughout the world.  
In compassion, and in apprehension  
we lift up to you today people everywhere  
who are in any way affected by the Covid-19 pandemic.  
We bring before you people seriously ill, struggling for life, and their distraught families,  
separated by disease control measures.  
We pray for the grieving, denied even the support and solace of a proper funeral;  
those in despair, as they see their employment or their businesses disappear.  
We ask for your comfort and support for all.

Lord Jesus Christ,  
who healed the sick, and wept over Lazarus,  
we pray for all who work in the service of those who are ill:  
for doctors and nurses and medical teams,  
many working long hours,  
struggling, in the face of personal risk,  
to bring healing and comfort and consolation.  
Grant them your strength.  
Support and guide scientists working to produce vaccines and medicines,

and the people who advise and decide on policy and control measures.

Gracious God,  
as we remember how our Lord fed the five thousand,  
we bring to you a world where there is so much hunger.  
We bring before you the starving peoples in so many places;  
farmers surviving on meagre crops and low prices,  
mothers struggling to feed their children,  
families existing on cheap food and cut-price bargains.  
God, who feeds your people,  
help us to work in whatever way we can  
for a fairer sharing of the world's resources.

We pray for those whose hunger is not physical;  
those separated from family and friends by disease or control measures,  
and for people whose longing for companionship and friendship is an ongoing everyday  
reality.

We pray for those searching for meaning and purpose,  
for those reaching out for an end to grief and pain.  
God who feeds your people, help us to help people in need.

We pray for ourselves,  
and for all who seek to live in your way.  
When we are weary and dispirited,  
when our resources seem stretched to breaking-point,  
when we hunger and thirst for a sense of your presence:  
God, who feeds your people,  
renew us with courage, trust and vision for the future.  
Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

**Closing Hymn(5) 167** Guide me, O thou great Jehovah

**Closing Words and Benediction**

Go out again into the world, rejoicing in God's generous love.  
May you be fed by the living God,  
who makes, feeds and sustains the world.

And the blessing of God almighty, Father, Son, Holy Spirit,  
be with you, and remain with you, and those whom you love,  
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.