

**ORPHIR and STENNESS CHURCH,
Handout Service for Sunday 5th. July 2020, Proper 9A**

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 them – or sing them.

God bless you all.

Today we find Jesus expressing disappointment and frustration, but also gratitude to God, and encouragement to his followers.

First, let us take a moment of quietness,
and know the presence of God among us.

Pause

Come to God, all who are weary and tired.
Come to God, all who are burdened by life.
Come to God, all who feel trapped and underappreciated.
For you will find.:
 the rest you need,
 the peace you seek,
 and the love you long for.
Come to God, in Jesus Christ. Amen.

Call to Worship:

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

Come now to worship, and receive rest for your souls. Amen.

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): 212 Morning has broken

Opening Prayer and Lord's Prayer

In our separate places, but uniting in fellowship with Christian people everywhere,
we come this morning, bringing all our cares and all our worries,
laying them down before God.

The past few weeks and months have brought disruption of what we called our normal lives.
We have known frustration and anxiety, even fear and irritation,
and as now we set aside this short time of worship,
we open ourselves to God in the hope – in the expectation -
that he will transform and strengthen us;
that we may return once more to everyday things
better prepared to face all that may come our way.
We come, trusting in the promises of Jesus,
for he is gentle and humble in heart;
his yoke is easy, the burden he places upon us is light,
and he grants us rest.

In the presence of God we acknowledge that

we are frail and weak.
We do things we know quite well that we should not do;
we fail to do those things that we ought to do.
We do not fully understand our own frailty and imperfections.
Yet we trust in the forgiveness a God who knows us intimately,
and whose love is beyond measure.
Thanks be to God.

O God,
gracious in your loving, merciful in your judgements,
steadfast in your faithfulness to us, compassionate to all:
may we always be thankful for all your goodness:
may we always sing your praises, speak of your greatness,
and bring glory to you by our actions,
through Jesus Christ our Lord,
Who taught us to 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): 557 O love that wilt not let me go

Readings:

Romans 7: 15-25a (NRSV)

I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. But in fact it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me.

So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!

Hymn (3): 259 Beauty for brokenness

Gospel Reading

Matt. 11: 16-19 and 25-30 (New Century Version):

What can I say about the people of this time? What are they like? They are like children sitting in the marketplace, who call out to each other, 'We played music for you, but you did not dance; we sang a sad song, but you did not cry.' John came and did not eat or drink like other people. So people say, 'He has a demon.' The Son of Man came, eating and drinking, and people say, 'Look at him! He eats too much and drinks too much wine, and he is a friend of tax collectors and sinners.' But wisdom is proved to be right by what she does."

At that time Jesus said, "I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the people who are wise and smart. But you have shown them to those who are like little children. Yes, Father, this is what you really wanted. My Father has given me all things. No one knows the Son, except the Father. And no one knows the Father, except the Son and those whom the Son chooses to tell.

Come to me, all of you who are tired and have heavy loads, and I will give you rest. Accept my teachings and learn from me, because I am gentle and humble in spirit, and you will find rest for your lives. The burden that I ask you to accept is easy; the load I give you to carry is light."

Message

Our reading from Matthew's Gospel today shows us Jesus continuing his ministry, proclaiming his message in Galilee. Not everyone is happy to hear what he has to say, and Jesus gives 'this generation' a telling-off for failing to see what God is doing among them.

The first half of this Chapter is really a tribute by Jesus to John the Baptist. John is in prison, desperately needing to know that Jesus really is the Messiah, or if he himself has stepped aside for nothing. John gets the reassurance he needs. Then Jesus goes on to tell the crowd that John is a great prophet, yet nevertheless he is a man prepared to humble himself so that Jesus could step into his rightful place.

But the crowd aren't really interested. John is yesterday's news - just a crazy ascetic, a weirdo, with outlandish clothes and a strange diet, and some very rigorous demands. On the other hand, Jesus is the man of the moment, at least until he puts a foot wrong, or until somebody more interesting or less demanding turns up.

Today's Reading shows us two faces of Jesus. First we find him exasperated by the crowd, who are behaving like selfish, discontented children, who will play only their own game, and even then only if they get to choose the main part. They are like boys who want to 'play at funerals', refusing to give way and play with the girls who want to 'play at weddings'. John's game is too sad, too stern, too restrictive, but on the other hand Jesus's game is too noisy, and, after all, he is 'a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of sinners'.

They don't really know what they want, and the end result is that, like crabby, dissatisfied children, they have no one to play with at all. They discard both John and Jesus, the very people who offer salvation, and isolate themselves in their unhappiness. Maybe we can think of some parallels in our own time. How often is the Church criticised for being too judgemental, then, in the next breath, satirised for being too liberal?

This is only the first half of the picture. The other half is the intimate picture of Jesus' relationship with his Father in verses 25 - 27.

"Wisdom is proved to be right by what she does." Jesus says (v.19). Matthew sees the success of Jesus's mission as proof that Jesus really is the long-awaited Messiah, a fact so self-evident that even a child can see it (v.25). Jesus, the Son of God, shows us what God the Father is like.

Here we have one of the most powerful statements in the gospels about the divinity of Jesus. This statement could easily have been seen as blasphemous, so Matthew takes care to justify his claim by showing his readers that every part of the Jewish Scriptures has been fulfilled in Jesus: first the Law and the Prophets (Matthew 5.17), and now the personification of Wisdom that we find in books such as Proverbs, and also in what we know as the Apocrypha - the Jewish writings from between Old and New Testament, books such as Ecclesiasticus, The Wisdom of Solomon, Esdras, and others.

In the Book of Proverbs, the guiding presence of God in daily life is personified as a Wise Woman, (*Sophia* = wisdom) who was present with God at creation, and who invites and guides followers on to the path of wisdom that leads on to life. In the same way, the Apocryphal Books also portray Wisdom as a female figure who acted as a guide and teacher, helping people on the path of righteousness. Wisdom was sent to earth in person to call Israel, and all humankind, to a life of obedience to God. Some people listened to her: most did not. Wisdom spoke through wise men and prophets, but most of them were rejected by the people to whom she sent them. In the

Apocrypha, Sirach, also known as Ecclesiasticus, speaks of being *yoked together with Wisdom*, and this is the image that Jesus uses to invite people to be yoked directly to him, to walk with him as closely as two oxen walk, ploughing a field together.

Matthew shows us Jesus speaking about himself as the Wisdom of God. *Jesus is the Wisdom of God*. This is important stuff. We find the same idea in the first chapter of John's Gospel, where John speaks about **the Word**. He says, *"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."*

The Word – the *Logos* – *Sophia* - the eternal Wisdom of God that existed before the world began, and that became flesh in Jesus. "The Word became flesh and lived among us." This is an astounding concept; a tremendously important view: Jesus, the Son of God, is the incarnation of divine Wisdom that existed before the world began! The eternal Wisdom of God became flesh and blood in Jesus.

This is the Man Jesus who speaks so intimately to, and about, God his Father: "My Father has given me all things. No one knows the Son, except the Father. And no one knows the Father, except the Son, and those whom the Son chooses to tell.."

This is the Man who says, "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. (John 14:9). That means we know what God is like! God is like this Man who offers the invitation:

"Come to me, all of you who are tired and have heavy loads, and I will give you rest. Accept my teachings, and learn from me, because I am gentle and humble in spirit, and you will find rest for your lives. The burden that I ask you to accept is easy; the load I give you to carry is light".

Jesus's call must have been a compelling invitation for those crowds in Galilee as they struggled under the burdens of poverty, hard work, and oppressive taxation. In our day, at the present time, it is a compelling invitation for everyone who is burdened in any way –by sickness, especially Covid-19 and the worry and fear it arouses; by sorrow; by debt; by addiction; by discrimination – and we have seen a lot of that lately; burdened by sin, and maybe even by a sense of religious obligation (Matt. 23:4).

Jesus sought to reach out to everyone, but he had a special affinity with those who were burdened with 'yokes' that he could help them to bear: the meek, the broken-hearted, and the poor. True religion should always set people free, rather than tangle them up in rules and regulations, as became increasingly the case for those burdened by the Jewish Law.

Even in our own day it is sometimes said that it is Christians with their restrictive 'rules' and disapproving attitudes, their 'don't do this', and 'don't do that', rather than the Christian doctrine itself, that deter others from joining the Christian community.

Mahatma Gandhi once uttered a challenging criticism of how some Christians choose to live. He said:

"I like your Christ, I do not like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ."

Would that apply to you or me?

Jesus tells us that all of these burdens I have mentioned, and more, can be taken from us, if we will be yoked to him. If that sounds like another burden, he reassures us that his yoke is easy and his burden light. And he would know. Very likely, as a carpenter, he made wooden yokes for oxen, carefully measuring them and adjusting them so that they would fit comfortably without chafing, so that the animals would be able to work without suffering or injury. The word used for "easy" can mean "well-fitting". Tailor-made to fit the animal.

It has been suggested that, while Jesus worked in the carpenter's shop in Nazareth throughout his undocumented years, the sign above the door might have been, "My yokes fit well". **My yoke is easy.**

Being placed under a yoke is a metaphor for being conquered, brought under domination or control. The Jews were under the yoke of the Romans. The word *subjugation* means placed under the yoke. Yet, paradoxically, to follow Jesus' invitation, "Take my yoke upon you", is the way to find rest for our souls.

When Jesus says, "My yoke is easy", what he means is: "The burden I give you is not a burden to cause you pain. Your task is made to measure to fit you."

Whatever God sends us is made to fit our needs and our abilities exactly. That's a comforting thought in these times.

When Jesus says, "The burden that I ask you to accept is easy; the load I give you to carry is light", he does not necessarily mean that the burden is easy to carry - but it is laid on us in love, and it is meant to be carried in love, and love can make the heaviest burden light. When we remember the love of God, when we remember that *our* burden is to love God and to love one another, then the burden becomes light indeed. There is an old story of a man who met a little boy, carrying on his back a smaller boy who was lame. "That's a heavy burden for you to carry", said the man.

"That's no a burden," came the answer, "That's my peedie brother."

The burden given in love, and carried in love, is light.

Elsewhere in Matthew's Gospel we find warnings about the difficulties, the costliness, of following Jesus, and the likelihood of coming into conflict with the political and religious establishment. Here is a reminder of the gracious Lord who in love invites us to follow.

How do you respond?

Amen. SDG

(Offering) Hymn (4) 540 I heard the voice of Jesus say

Dedication

Loving God,
in other times, and in other ways,
in gratitude, we make our offerings for the work of the Church
offerings of money, and of time and effort,
asking that they may be wisely used;
and dedicating again to you our lives,
lived daily in the way of the Gospel.
In gratitude we make our offerings. Amen.

Prayers of Intercession

Loving God,
We pray for people bearing heavy burdens,
and for those who lay down their burdens, only to pick up greater burdens.
We give thanks for those being eased out of restrictions,
for hope of a beginning return to 'normal',
yet remembering that it may be a different kind of normal.

We pray for all people in authority, in national and local government,

in medical services, and elsewhere.

May they be respectfully conscious of their responsibilities.

Grant them wisdom and guidance in their duties to the people they serve,
and, in their personal lives, in coping with worries and cares known only to them.

We pray for those whose burdens are less obvious, but no less onerous:
those struggling with the burdens of illness; of disability; of fear and anxiety;
those bearing the burden of a broken heart;
those burdened by memories of the past,
or weighed down by the demands and expectations of other people.

Lord, we pray for the weary,
that, under your easy yoke, they may find new strength;
for those who are burdened, that their loads may be lightened.

We pray for our own families, our friends, our colleagues,
asking that, as we walk alongside them, in body or in spirit,
you will use us to bring them close to you in the assurance of your love.

Help us, we pray, to see the positive in other people, even when it is difficult,
and to reach out to them in encouragement.
May we be sensitive to the needs of all those around us,
the people we see every day, perhaps briefly,
not knowing what burdens they may be carrying, or if they may need a kind word from you
that only we can pass on.

We pray for those whose lives are complicated
that you may help them to see with the clarity of children.
Yoked to you, may they see as children do.
Lord, we pray for ourselves with all our failures and deficiencies.
Yoked to you, may we find forgiveness and peace.
in our friendship with you.

We pause in our own time and space to bring to you those special prayers
that we carry in the privacy of our own hearts.

Pause

We bring all our prayers in the name of Jesus. Amen.

Closing Hymn (5) 512 To God be the glory, great things he has done

Closing Words and Benediction

Jesus has called us to come to him and has blessed us with his richness.

Now he sends us out into his world,
to make sure that, through us,
his hands and his voices in this place,
people may see him, and listen to him, and follow him.
Go out into the world in his strength.

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