

ORPHIR and STENNESS CHURCH
Handout for Sunday 6th. September 2020; Proper 18A

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. If you know of anyone not on the list who would like to receive these services, please pass email address to Nicol or Kathryn, and please feel free to pass on hard copies to people who don't have internet access. God bless you all.

Gathering Words and Prayer

In our Gospel reading today Jesus says that those who live in a kingdom community should watch over one another in love, gently pointing out when a brother or sister fails to live by the values Jesus teaches.

First, let us take a moment to settle ourselves and to know that God is here with us

Together we come to worship, individuals gathered as one in the name of the Lord.
Amen.

Call to worship

Do you have a desire, a deep desire to worship, and to know the Lord God,
and to understand the values of the kingdom?
Come, then, and worship – for Jesus says,
“Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them”.

Hymn (1): 510 Jesus calls us here to meet him

Opening Prayer and Lord's Prayer

As we bring our prayers to the Lord our God,
the God in whom we live and move and have our being,
we think of who we are, and who God is, and we hesitate and tremble.

Now, in this moment, may God bring us to know him more closely.
May he see us as we are, but see also our yearning to be more like him.
May we lay aside anything
that hinders our journey with God, and with our friends and neighbours.
Remembering his love and care for us,
his patience with us when we lose our way,
in our own individual places, we come to worship
the God of all peoples and all communities, the Lord of all creation.

In the confusion of our lives at this present time,
in our fears and apprehensions in the face of the pandemic,
when challenges and changes seem to pull us this way and that,
sometimes we find it hard to know what is right and what is wrong.
We acknowledge our failings and wrongdoings,
our insensitivities to the ways of others,
those things that would cut us off from each other and from God,
and we trust in his renewing grace.

May God fill us with a spirit of understanding,
so that we may be slow to take offence, and quick to forgive.
May his grace flow through all our dealings,

his love through all we do together.

God is all around us and within us,
yet above and beyond all our imaginings.
We bring praise and thanks that, again and again,
we are engulfed in the infinity of his love,
the love made manifest in Jesus Christ his Son, our Lord,
in whose name, and in whose words we pray:
*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): 197 As we are gathered Jesus us here

Readings:

Psalm 119:33-40; (NRSVA)

Teach me, O Lord, the way of your statutes,
and I will observe it to the end.
Give me understanding, that I may keep your law
and observe it with my whole heart.
Lead me in the path of your commandments,
for I delight in it.
Turn my heart to your decrees,
and not to selfish gain.
Turn my eyes from looking at vanities;
give me life in your ways.
Confirm to your servant your promise,
which is for those who fear you.
Turn away the disgrace that I dread,
for your ordinances are good.
See, I have longed for your precepts;
in your righteousness give me life

Romans 13:8-14 (NRSVA): Love for One Another

Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments, 'You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet'; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, 'Love your neighbour as yourself.' Love does no wrong to a neighbour; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.

An Urgent Appeal

Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armour of light; let us live honourably as in the day, not in revelling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarrelling and jealousy. Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

Hymn (3): 485 Dear Lord and Father of mankind

Gospel Reading: Matt. 18:15-20: Reproving Another Who Sins

'If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax-collector. Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.'

Message

From our Gospel reading today, it is immediately clear that, even in the early Christian community, there has never been a perfect, harmonious fellowship that needed no guidelines about how to handle disputes, and, just as clearly, having guidelines doesn't make you observe them.

Human beings are social animals. We need the company of other people, especially like-minded people. We depend on other people in countless ways. That's why we form ourselves into families and groups. Yet it is so easy to fall out with people, isn't it? Some people are very prickly – always to be ready to take offence, even when none is intended. Maybe we are just as bad! It's a two-way process.

Often, quite innocently, even unknowingly, something we say or do, or fail to say or do, is interpreted by somebody else in a way that we could never have imagined. I expect you can think of examples. We are all different. Our sense of humour differs – what is funny to one person may be insulting to another.

Old loyalties and allegiances last a lifetime, even for generations, and, unfortunately, so do old grudges. I have known people not on speaking terms with certain others long years after the original cause of the disagreement had been forgotten. Families who did not talk to other families because of something that happened in their parents' time.

We might think that Christian people should be less prone to falling out, but, as we all know, there are plenty of examples of disagreements between and within congregations, and, too often, some ill feeling that should have been sorted out years ago. In a past life, and since I trained for Readership and then OLM, I have got to know a bit about a dozen or more congregations, here, and sooth, and I have been aware of various little niggles that might be amusing if they were not serious. Like a bit of 'them and us' attitude in linked congregations that amalgamated under one roof decades ago.

Even in the healthiest congregations there will be disagreement: that's normal, even healthy. Yet it does seem very easy to give offence. In a congregation sooth that I knew well, there was one particular elder who had a very busy and very demanding job. He worked long hours, and his wife also led a busy life, but they still found time to do a great deal for the church. They were well off, and they contributed handsomely to the finances.

I remember one evening John arrived late for a meeting of the Board. He came in, apologised, and sat down. The minister, being facetious, said, "O yes, skiving again". No offence was intended, but serious offence was taken. John sought out the minister later, told him that he did not think that his efforts on behalf of the church were sufficiently appreciated. He and his wife and family left the church and joined another congregation.

I am sure you can see faults on both sides. We must be careful to avoid causing offence and upsetting people, but equally we must not be too ready to take offence, especially where none is intended. We have to be ready to see the good in the other person, no matter how hard that may be. Most difficult of all is recognising that we may be in the wrong – that we

are in the wrong – that we have made a mistake. It is very hard to back down, especially if we continue to believe we are right.

Our gospel reading today gives guidance on handling disputes within the Christian community, and very sensible it is, even if it could not have come directly from Jesus as it stands. Matthew, writing about AD 80-90, talks about 'the church': but there was no church in Jesus's time. Jesus was a Jew. He taught in the Jewish synagogues and in the streets and the countryside. There was no church till much later. This passage seems more like the Regulations of a Church committee, and it implies a fully-developed organised church with an established discipline process. It speaks of the tax collectors and Gentiles as irreclaimable outsiders – yet Jesus was accused of being a friend of tax-collectors and sinners. Remember too that the Good Samaritan was one of those hated outsiders. The whole tone of the passage suggests that there is a limit to forgiveness, a time when someone should be abandoned as beyond hope – not the kind of advice that Jesus would give!

Nevertheless, Matthew sets out the proper procedure to be followed when individual Christians fall out with each other. It starts with a private word, moves on to a small meeting, and ends up with the person being estranged from the community. All very helpful. However, the guidance is told from the point of view of the person who is in the right, and at every stage there is another story to be told.

Suppose you are not the offended person, but the offender? When your fellow Christian comes to complain about your behaviour, how do you react? Maybe, convinced of your own innocence, you genuinely do not see the other point of view. Fine, but when the complainer comes back with a couple of others who also agree that you are in the wrong, what then? Do you pause, and think again, maybe try to change, or do you shout that of course these people would stick together, and then go off and find some of your ain buddos who will stick up for you? That is very likely to escalate things, and lead to divisions and cliques within the church.

Consider another scenario. You're convinced that someone has done something wrong, but, after a private word, the person won't admit it. You go and fetch some other Christians who are not involved, expecting them to side with you. What if, for whatever reason, they take the other person's part, or suggest a compromise? Do you insist on complete surrender, at risk of splitting the church, or do you agree, even if you're not convinced?

Then the final stage. You have been proved right at every turn. Your fellow Christian is in the wrong – but is unwilling to change. You are now allowed to treat him/her like 'a Gentile and a tax-collector'. Can that be right? Jesus doesn't set limits to human forgiveness - later in the same chapter he talks about seventy times seven. When we find him speaking about the tax-gatherers and sinners it is always with sympathy, gentleness, and appreciation of their good qualities. Throughout the Gospel we see Jesus's constant care for just such groups of excluded people, so every effort must be made to bring this excluded person back in, to be treated with the love and the care that Jesus showed to Gentiles and tax-collectors.

Does it not seem much more like Jesus to say:
"When you have done all that you can, given the sinners every possible chance, and they still remain stubborn and obdurate, you may think that they are no better than tax-collectors or pagans, but I have not found the tax-gatherers and Gentiles hopeless: I have found that they too have a heart to be touched, and many of them, like Matthew and Zacchaeus have become my best friends"?

Jesus does not think of anybody as hopeless, and neither should we.

We all know that divisions do occur, maybe more often than they should. We must sometimes hold out for truth against falsehood – maybe not as often as we should. In the midst of temptations and squabbles, we need to think of what our unity might do. “If two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven”, we are told – and, Jesus adds, “I’ll be there too”. Is Jesus being sarcastic here? Does he mean ‘If even just two of you could agree about something’? What price our tendency to fall out with one another?

In our reading from Romans we see Paul taking the same line, but broadening it to take account of Christian conduct in general. You know quite well what you ought to be doing, he says. Every law and commandment can be summed up in the words, “Love your neighbour as yourself.”

The bottom line?

Here we have sensible practical advice for avoiding and mending broken relationships within the Christian fellowship. We need to be ready to consider the other person’s view; ready to accept that we just might be wrong, willing to back down. Not easy! There is a lot here about humility and about forgiveness and reconciliation – about recognising that we all make mistakes.

We are to do our best to act in love. We are to speak the truth in a spirit of love, as Paul advises in Ephesians, and to resolve the problem. Then we don’t harbour a grudge for years afterwards – remember, “love does not keep a record of wrongs”. (1 Cor. 13)

The ability of the Church to handle these difficulties depends on three things – the three Fs, somebody said:

Faith – and you only need faith as big as a mustard seed;
Fellowship – the readiness of the Church to pray and act together;
Forgiveness – and the willingness to forgive without limit.

One Christian author remembers praying the Lord’s Prayer and suddenly feeling as if Jesus was saying to him,
“Do you really know what you are asking? You want me to forgive you, but I can’t truly forgive you until you first forgive Name.”

Among the challenging stuff in our readings today there is guidance for our everyday relationships with other Christians, all the more important in these difficult and testing times when the Church is being forced to recognise that the Pandemic has brought big changes, and that there are likely to be more changes to come.

When we eventually get back to ‘normal’, we may find a different normal, with new and exciting opportunities for reviewing and renewing and refreshing our Church and our Christian life and witness. There is cause for optimism.

Let us step forward in the power of Christ.

Amen. Soli Deo Gloria.

(Offering) Hymn (4) 544 When I needed a neighbour

Dedication

Gracious God,
We have no words deep enough to thank you for all your goodness,
no deeds great enough to thank you for all your love,
no gifts costly enough to thank you for your gift in Jesus Christ.
We bring you our offerings as a token of our love,

a sign of our worship, and a symbol of our discipleship,
offered to you, through Christ our Lord, in joyful and grateful praise.
Amen.

Prayers of Intercession

Eternal, ever-living God,
we pray for those who this day need our prayers,
and it seems that there are so many.

We pray for those who are able to gather with us,
and for all those, family and friends, near and far,
separated by time or distance or disease control measures.
We pray for strangers and communities we will never meet, never know,
but whose perils and predicaments and suffering
are brought to us on radio or on our screens:
those afflicted by storms and floods and fire;
people caught up in demonstrations
against injustice and discrimination and corruption.
We pray too for those who cause grief and chaos in society,
who live according to different values from ours,
for them, and for their victims and their families.
In the midst all these troubles we pray for those
who are overlooked, forgotten, unnoticed, unloved, unmissed.

As the Covid pandemic continues in our country and throughout the world,
we pray for all those to whom it has brought
suffering and death and bereavement;
people struggling with the disease,
those whose life is ebbing away,
those who grieve deeply for lives and loves lost.

We pray for medical teams ministering to the needs of those who are ill,
often at risk to themselves,
for scientists seeking for medicines and vaccines,
and for those charged with formulating and implementing government policy.

In silence, or in the privacy of our own special places,
we bring our personal concerns to God,
who knows and understands our deepest thoughts.
May God grant us support and perseverance when we struggle,
and a sustaining sign when we get things right.

We pray for those beside us, those in our minds and our hearts,
acknowledging and respecting what they cannot share with us.

Loving God, grant us a sense of impatience for change,
rather than acceptance of things as they are,
and help us to play our part in bringing about change for the better.

God-with-us,
hear our fears and our needs;
take us by the hand and walk beside us,
advise, encourage and guide us.
Grant us peace in our hearts, and the fuller joys of Christ in our lives.
In your abundance of your mercy,
Lord God, hear these and all our prayers.

In Jesus' name we ask. Amen.

Closing Hymn (5) 198 Let us build a house 198

Closing Words and Benediction

We go into tomorrow and the days ahead as those who would share not only the world as we know it, but the world that, in the power of Christ we can make it be.

May you stay safe in the way of Christ,

and may the Blessing of God almighty, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit,

be with you, and remain with you and those whom you love, today 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.