

## **Handout for Orphir and Stenness Church, Sunday 09.08.20, Prop14A**

### **Order of Service:**

#### **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**

Today we hear again the familiar story of Jesus waking on the water and Peter setting out to join him

Let us pause for a moment and know that God is here among us.

God of everything, God of everywhere,  
we find you by the shore, we see you on the hillside,  
we hear your voice in hidden places.  
May we feel your presence with us as we worship today. 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): 189 Be Still**

#### **Opening Prayer and Lord's Prayer**

Gentle God,  
speak to us in the sound of silence;  
speak to us above the sounds of everyday life;  
speak to us with words from Scripture;  
speak to us through the voices of the past;  
speak to us from the experience of faith;  
speak to us as we read your Word.

We acknowledge that we often fail to hear your call,  
drowning out your voice in our own noise and busyness,  
and forget to be still and to listen to you.  
We seek for you in your glory, but fail to see you standing next to us:  
we look for you in good and holy people,  
but fail to see you in those people who make us uncomfortable.

Forgive us and help us, for you are a kind and gentle God,  
who seeks us out to bring us home.

God of all faithfulness,  
in Christ, you meet us in the ordinary and everyday things of life.  
As we are tossed about by the storms of life, you are there in the boat with us;  
when we are at our lowest ebb, you reach out to us.  
You call to us to step out of the boat,  
to step forward in faith beyond our own limitations.  
You pick us up when we falter and let you down.

You offer us calm and peace when all around us familiar things are pushed aside in the struggle to control the pandemic.

We bring you our worship, our thanks, and our praise.

Loving God,  
as you sent your Holy Spirit to be the life and light of your Church,  
open now our hearts to the riches of your grace,  
that we may bring forth the fruit of the Spirit in love, joy, and peace;  
through Jesus Christ our Lord,  
who is alive and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,  
one God, now and for ever, and in whose words we pray saying:  
*Our Father which 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 the Power and the Glory for ever Amen.*

**Hymn (2): 716** Come and find the quiet centre

**Readings:**

**1 Kings 19: 9-18 (NRSV):**

At that place he (Elijah) came to a cave, and spent the night there.

Then the word of the Lord came to him, saying, 'What are you doing here, Elijah?' He answered, 'I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away.'

*Elijah Meets God at Horeb*

He said, 'Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by.' Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then there came a voice to him that said, 'What are you doing here, Elijah?' He answered, 'I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away.' Then the Lord said to him, 'Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus; when you arrive, you shall anoint Hazael as king over Aram. Also you shall anoint Jehu son of Nimshi as king over Israel; and you shall anoint Elisha son of Shaphat of Abel-meholah as prophet in your place. Whoever escapes from the sword of Hazael, Jehu shall kill; and whoever escapes from the sword of Jehu, Elisha shall kill. Yet I will leave seven thousand in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him.'

**Romans 10: 5-15: (NRSVA):** *Salvation is for All*

Moses writes concerning the righteousness that comes from the law, that 'the person who does these things will live by them.' But the righteousness that comes from faith says, 'Do not say in your heart, "Who will ascend into heaven?"' (that is, to bring Christ down) 'or "Who will descend into the abyss?"' (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). But what does it say?

'The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart'  
(that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); because if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For one

believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved. The scripture says, 'No one who believes in him will be put to shame.' For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him. For, 'Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.'

But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him? And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent? As it is written, 'How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!'

**Hymn (3): 55** Safe in the shadow of the Lord

**Gospel Reading:** Matt. 14: 22-33; (NRSVA); Jesus Walks on the Water

Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. And early in the morning he came walking towards them on the lake. But when the disciples saw him walking on the lake, they were terrified, saying, 'It is a ghost!' And they cried out in fear. But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, 'Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.'

Peter answered him, 'Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.' He said, 'Come.' So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came towards Jesus. But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, 'Lord, save me!' Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, 'You of little faith, why did you doubt?' When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. And those in the boat worshipped him, saying, 'Truly you are the Son of God.'

### **Message**

Somebody has remarked that there is something about us that is deeply resistant to the grace of God. It's not that we don't believe in God, or don't want to follow him, or knowingly reject him, but somehow we keep turning back to the idea that there is something that we have to do to please God, and get him on our side. It's as though God were far away, and a hard taskmaster.

In our passage from Romans we find Paul making a direct comparison between the Law and justification by faith. His usual line is that the Law in itself is not bad, but the problem is that we are not capable of keeping it. Here, however, he is comparing what he sees as the attitudes behind two ways of approaching God. On the one hand the Law is all about doing things. It's as if God keeps a kind of credit and debit account, so that, if we're good, we may end up on the credit side, but more likely we will end up on the wrong side.

Faith, on the other hand, is an acceptance of what God has done in sending Jesus, and in raising him from the dead. All of that was done without any input, even without any consent, from us. All we have to do is recognise what God has done. We don't need to put in strenuous effort or go running after God. God is closer to us than our own breath and our own heartbeat. Marcus Borg writes:

*"God is more than everything, even as God is present everywhere. God is all around us and within us, and we are within God."*

This is the God 'in whom we live and move and have our being'.

However, in our reading from Matthew's Gospel Peter is showing us how hard it is to believe all that. The background there is that Jesus's ministry is beginning to cause serious worry, both to

Herod and to the Jewish religious establishment, and Jesus is trying to find time and space for himself, time for prayer and for preparation for the confrontations that he knows are to come. Now, after the feeding of the five thousand, he persuades his disciples to go off in the boat and leave him alone.

Can you imagine the conversation on the boat that night? The disciples, excited by the miracle they had just witnessed, enthusiastic and hopeful for the future, but, as they wait for Jesus, and as the storm starts to blow up, beginning to worry and lose heart. Then, 'early in the morning [Jesus] came walking towards them on the lake'. In that superstitious age they thought they were seeing a ghost, and they were terrified, until Jesus reassures them, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid".

Peter immediately becomes all enthusiastic again. He wants another taste of the excitement of Jesus's miracles. "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water."

Peter assumes that, if Jesus commands him to do something, he will also provide the ability to do it. Jesus indulges him, and invites him to step out of the boat. So far, so good; but on the unstable water, with the wind stronger out of the shelter of the boat, Peter panics, and begins to sink. "Lord, save me!"

Maybe the immediate lesson here for us all is that, when we take our eyes off Jesus, we begin to sink. Maybe Peter thought that Jesus's miracles were a kind of magic, to be called up at will. In a way he is doing what Paul warns against – trying to get God's support by his own efforts, but instead of that, he has to reach out his hand to Jesus and acknowledge that he walks on the water as a disciple of Jesus and not by any kind of magic. "You of little faith", says Jesus, "Why did you doubt?" Well may we understand the response of the other disciples in the boat: "Truly you are the Son of God."

What are we to make of this story of Jesus walking on the water? It is one of the best known in the gospels. No doubt it has been the subject of a great many sermons. Perhaps there is nothing fresh to say about it, but there are some things that are worth saying again.

The salient messages of the story are clear enough. If you want to walk on water, first you have to get out of the boat. Obvious. If you are to do anything remarkable, or worthwhile, you have to step forward in faith. Or the message that, as Christians, we can leap before we look – again, step forward in faith. Or, if you take your eyes off Jesus, if you allow yourself to be distracted by the difficulties around you, you start to sink. All very relevant lessons.

Matthew's Gospel was written about 85 AD, 50 years after the crucifixion, and some time after the Jewish revolt and the subsequent destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in AD 70. Some theologians suggest that much of the Gospel was written around the memory of Jesus, for a particular purpose, rather than being strictly factual. That is not our concern here. Nor does it matter whether the story of the walking on the water is literally true. If you can accept it at face value, fine. If not – if you have to take the scientific view - it may help to know that the original Greek could be taken to mean that Jesus walked *on* the water, or *in* the water – or even *towards* the water.

What is important is that this story had immediate relevance for the early Christian Community of Matthew's time, struggling to survive in the face of serious opposition and persecution. In the New Testament, stormy waters symbolise chaos and evil – the waters are rebelling against God's rule that they should keep peacefully in their appointed place. Likewise, in the first century, a boat was often used to signify the church. For Jesus to walk on the water demonstrates not only his authority over nature, but also his authority over chaos and evil.

Matthew's community would have readily identified with these disciples. They too felt all at sea, at risk, battered by powers they could not control. The earthly life of Jesus was long past, and they felt isolated and dispirited.

Matthew's story is equally relevant to us. Researchers have been telling us for years that the Christian Church in this country is in serious decline, and they produce alarming figures to prove it. They tell us that the majority of people see the church as less and less relevant to their everyday lives. Many people are no longer prepared to subscribe to the standards of morality and behaviour that the Christian Church advocates. You don't have to look far to find newspaper articles criticising, even ridiculing, our beliefs – to the extent that I sometimes wonder whether a profession of atheism is a necessary qualification for a job as a journalist. To proclaim your Christian faith in the workplace, or in social activities, is to invite derision, or to be considered a bit eccentric, and all too often we draw back from doing it. On top of this, the Covid-19 pandemic has brought its own special problems, and it may be that if, and when, everything gets back to 'normal', it will be a very different normal for the church as for everything else.

Contrast these attitudes with certain others – our Muslim cousins, for example, who are vociferous in the defence of their faith. Certainly, extremist minorities have been responsible for appalling atrocities, but we don't have to look far to find atrocities perpetrated in the past – and even in our own times - in the name of Christianity. The problem isn't Islam, or Christianity, or any other religion. The problem is intolerance, and fanaticism and hatred - sins that transcend religion.

We may argue that these things were done by misguided minorities who twist scripture to suit their purposes. All the more need for those of us in mainstream Christianity, the ordinary people of the Church, to show the world that we are committed to the example of Jesus Christ, to the three-word slogan that GOD IS LOVE. Do you stand up for your Christian beliefs? Are you ready at all times and in all places to speak up for your faith? Have you missed any opportunities? I have missed far too many.

Most of us -all of us - have made a commitment to the service of Jesus Christ: haven't we? Do we still honour that commitment, or have we defaulted on the payments?

Paul tells us:

*"If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved."*

And: *'No one who believes in him will be put to shame ..... Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.'*

A final thought. Our New Testament readings today tell us that Christianity is not a system, not a regimented formula for living that some people can adopt easily and reap the benefits, whereas others can't. Christianity is a unique relationship, offered by God, in which our place is opened up by Jesus, and in which we receive constant teaching and encouragement through the Holy Spirit.

You don't need to be 'good' at it. The number of places is not limited. You don't need to pass an exam to get in. You don't need to do anything extraordinary to prove to God that you're good enough, and you don't have to look for God in the power of the wind or the earthquake or the fire just because you maybe think that silence and the sound of your own heartbeat are too small and ordinary for God. Elijah, and Paul, and the disciples have all seen the spectacular power of God, but much more impressive, much more breathtaking, is the offer of a relationship with God through Jesus Christ.

What more could we ask?

Amen. Soli Deo Gloria.

**(Offering) Hymn (4) 485** Dear Lord and Father of mankind

**Dedication of Offering:**

For the blessings of this day and all our days, we thank you, gracious God.  
Accept, we pray, our gifts, not only of money but also of our lives,  
freely offered in gratitude for all you have done for us.  
Use them all, to your glory. Amen.

**Prayers of Intercession**

Loving God,  
We come to you in prayer for our needy and broken world,  
a world beset by a deadly disease,  
asking for the grace of your healing power.

We pray for those tossed about by all that life throws at them,  
who feel out of control, overtaken by events they cannot influence,  
discouraged, at a loss, not knowing which way to turn.  
We pray for those confronted by unexpected problems,  
especially the unforeseen challenges of the pandemic.  
We pray for people seriously ill, those struggling to survive,  
for medical teams striving to care for them,  
for administrators, and for all who have much asked of them,  
and fear they will be overwhelmed.

We pray for the people of Beirut, where the effects of the catastrophic explosion  
has been added to all of their other problems.

Even as the lockdown is eased, we pray for the lonely,  
and for people who feel rejected or marginalised, unimportant, unpopular; unwanted,  
who feel they have more enemies than friends.

Even in the direst situations,  
may there be compassionate and devoted people through whose loving action  
the hungry may be fed, the downtrodden may be heard and learn to hope;  
people struggling with addiction may hear words of comfort and support,  
and all who resort to acts of violence may find ways of peace and kindness.

In a world that does not seem to value your word  
we pray that you will speak to those who find no meaning in their lives;  
to those who are uncertain and confused, yet sensing that there must be more to life,  
searching for what they do not know.

Encourage those who strive to be faithful in your service,  
that they may be continually surprised by grace.  
Be close to Christians who endure persecution,  
and to all who suffer for their obedience to your call.  
Strengthen the trust of your people  
that all who falter in face of the wind and the waves may know your steadying hand;  
that in their gratitude for your grace  
they may show to others sympathy rather than judgment,  
and be emboldened to share the good news of Jesus Christ.

We bring to you those we carry in our minds and our hearts today:

all who are ill, sick in body, mind or spirit, in home or hospital or hospice;  
those in the desolation of grief and loss;  
all who are lonely or anxious;  
all who are in any kind of need.

Pause

Living Lord,  
as we thank you for the witness of your word and the wideness of your mercy,  
may we be inspired to be the voice and the hands of Jesus in this place.  
In his name we pray. Amen

**Closing Hymn(5) CH3 No. 435:** Lord, in the fullness of my might

Lord, in the fullness of my might,  
I would for Thee be strong:  
While runneth o'er each dear delight,  
To Thee should soar my song.

I would not give the world my heart,  
And then profess Thy love;  
I would not feel my strength depart,  
And then Thy service prove.

I would not with swift wingèd zeal  
On the world's errands go,  
And labour up the heavenly hill  
With weary feet and slow.

O not for Thee my weak desires,  
My poorer, baser part!  
O not for Thee my fading fires,  
The ashes of my heart!

O choose me in my golden time:  
In my clear joys have part!  
For Thee the glory of my prime,  
The fullness of my heart!

**Closing Words and Benediction**

Be strong in the fulness of God's might,  
and in his strength go out to face whatever this new week may bring.  
And the blessing of God almighty,  
Father, Son, 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.