

ORPHIR and STENNESS CHURCH
Handout for Sunday 12.07.20; Proper 10A

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

For a few moments let us be still and know that we are in the presence of God.

Praise awaits you, our God, in Zion; to you our vows will be fulfilled.

You who answer prayer, to you all people will come.

When we were overwhelmed by sins, you forgave our transgressions.

Blessed are those you choose and bring near to live in your courts!

We are filled with the good things of your house, of your holy temple. (Ps. 65: 1-4)

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): 484 Great God, your love has called us here

Opening Prayer and Lord's Prayer

God of Love,

As in this brief time of peace and stillness we come before you in prayer,
we become aware of your presence with us;

your presence, Creator God, at whose word, in the beginning,
the universe came into being;

your presence, Son of the Most High,
whose very breath is life, and peace, and healing and wholeness;

your presence among us Holy Spirit,
who, even in deepest darkness, sparks joy, creativity, and love.

O God, we are in your presence now,
as indeed we have been in your presence every day of our lives,
for in you we live and move and have our being.

You are nearer than our next breath.

You have called us from eternity, and you call us now,
always to be your beloved people.

Despite the separation imposed upon us by the pandemic,
we join in spirit with your community in this place,
praying that our praise and worship may be joined with the praise and worship
of our brothers and sisters throughout all times and all places,
eternally proclaiming:

You are Good,

You are Holy,

You are Love.

God of mercy,

as we are aware that you are holy,
we remember that we have been unholy;

knowing that you are lovely,
we remember that we have been unlovely.
We seek your forgiveness for all that is not well with us.
We acknowledge our stumbling and sinfulness,
our hardness of heart, our insensitivity to the needs of others.
Lord, forgive us we pray,
for, trusting in the cleansing power of your Spirit,
we cling to the eternal certainty of your love for us.

Renew us in strength and heart,
that as forgiven people our lives may show your light,
our worship may be pleasing to you,
and that in truth we may be at one with all your disciples.

Glorious God,
we thank you for your activity in our lives,
and for the opportunity to offer ourselves to you,
and, by our time, our talents and resources
to commit ourselves to the work of your kingdom,
where love reigns, where peace is found, and mercy prevails;
a kingdom built, not with bricks or mortar,
but by prayer and actions of sacrificial love,
a kingdom whose foundation, head and cornerstone, is Jesus Christ,
whose strength sustains us in carrying on his mission
to the poor, the overlooked, and the lost,
and whose will it is that all God's children shall be united in his Spirit.

In his name, and in his 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): 137 All things bright and beautiful

Readings:

Psalm 65: 9-13 (NRSV):

Praise is due to you, O God, in Zion;

and to you shall vows be performed, O you who answer prayer!

To you all flesh shall come.

When deeds of iniquity overwhelm us, you forgive our transgressions.

Happy are those whom you choose and bring near to live in your courts.

We shall be satisfied with the goodness of your house, your holy temple.

By awesome deeds you answer us with deliverance, O God of our salvation;

you are the hope of all the ends of the earth and of the farthest seas.

By your strength you established the mountains; you are girded with might.

You silence the roaring of the seas, the roaring of their waves,

the tumult of the peoples.

Those who live at earth's farthest bounds are awed by your signs;

you make the gateways of the morning and the evening shout for joy.

You visit the earth and water it, you greatly enrich it;

the river of God is full of water; you provide the people with grain, for so you have prepared it.

You water its furrows abundantly, settling its ridges,

softening it with showers, and blessing its growth.

You crown the year with your bounty; your wagon tracks overflow with richness.

The pastures of the wilderness overflow, the hills gird themselves with joy,

the meadows clothe themselves with flocks, the valleys deck themselves with grain,
they shout and sing together for joy

Isaiah 55 10-13 (NRSV):

As the rain and the snow come down from heaven,
and do not return there until they have watered the earth,
making it bring forth and sprout,
giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,
so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;
it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,
and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.
For you shall go out in joy, and be led back in peace;
the mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song,
and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.
Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress; instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle;
and it shall be to the LORD for a memorial,
for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off.

Hymn (3): 641 Seek ye first the kingdom of God

Gospel Reading: Matt. 13: 1-9 and 18-23 (NRSV); The Sower;

That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the lake. Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. And he told them many things in parables, saying:
'Listen! A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. Let anyone with ears listen!

Hear then the parable of the sower. When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart; this is what was sown on the path. As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; yet such a person has no root, but endures only for a while, and when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, that person immediately falls away. As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing. But as for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty.

Message

The parable of the Sower is one of the best known and the best loved stories in the New Testament. A parable – a story that seems to be about one thing, but has a deeper meaning; an earthly story with a heavenly meaning, as somebody said.

This story has an immediacy that most of the modern translations of the New Testament obscure. It is not *a* sower who went out to sow: it is *the* sower. This tiny detail suggests to me that the story came direct from Jesus. Maybe, as Jesus was teaching the crowds, there was a sower actually sowing seed in a field nearby, and Jesus took him as his text: "Look at the sower there sowing his seed in that field!" He went from something they could see to open their minds to a truth that they had never seen.

The immediate meaning of the parable is clear - because Jesus tells us what it means. The seed is the word of God, and we are the ground. The seed is good, but its productivity depends on where it lands. A lot of the seed produces no crop at all, and seed that does take root and grow

produces a mixed harvest. There are different ways of accepting the Word of God, and the fruit which the Word produces depends on the attitudes of the hearers. Those who hear the word must receive it, and allow it to bear fruit in their lives.

The overall message of the reading is one of hope to the faithful disciples. Even when you can't see the results of your work, don't be discouraged, because God is in charge. It is also a warning that judgement is coming, and people had better get their house in order and decide which side they are on.

When we start to think about it, we see that the parable speaks to two sets of people: those who hear the word, and also those who preach the word. It says something about the Sower, the Hearers, and Ourselves.

I sometimes wonder which kind of ground I might be. Maybe you do the same. Are we the good soil, ready to receive the seed, ready to hear the word, and accept, it and bear fruit, thirty and sixty and a hundredfold?

Or are we the path, the hard ground, the shut minds, not prepared to discuss or to consider any other view but their own? Duggit. "We've aye done it this way." Maybe it's pride in what has been achieved, or fear of a new ideas, or unwillingness to give up the familiar, easy way. Do we know anybody like that? Ourselves, perhaps? God preserve us from ever thinking that we have nothing to learn!

Jesus doesn't ask the question, but we have to ask ourselves: might we even be the Evil One that comes and takes away the word that is sown in somebody else?

That first audience knew that changes were coming. Maybe we have changes coming too. Amid the pandemic we keep wondering when things will get back to normal,, but we need to be ready for a *new* 'normal'.

Second, I wonder whether we might be the rocky, shallow ground, where a thin skin of soil, only a few inches thick, overlies the limestone rock. With no depth to receive the roots, the shoots spring up, but quickly wither in the heat of the sun. Like people who start off with great intentions, but give up when the going gets tough.

"The pathway to hell is paved with good intentions", the saying goes. We can be caught up in the emotion of the moment, but the emotion wears off. Lots of people have been "converted" in evangelistic campaigns, only to falter in the face of difficulty or opposition or ridicule. We need an intelligent faith that lets us respond to the doubters and the scoffers. And we need staying power. Christianity is an enormous privilege, but it also has its demands and its responsibilities. We need to work at it.

Or might we even be the thorns that crowded out the seed, not only losing it ourselves, but depriving other people of it? You can make the garden look clean and tidy by cutting off the weeds at ground level, or turning them over, but all the weeds and pests stay there, ready to shoot up even faster than the plants you want to grow.

We are all busy, and it seems to be getting worse. Even during the Lockdown, the pressures and the distractions, and the temptations, are still there, and they seem to keep increasing. We become too busy to pray. We intend to make time for prayer and for reading the Bible, but we never get around to it. Our work, our family ties, or our leisure activities take such a hold on us that we have no time or energy to think of anything else, or we're too tired.

As pressures ease and we do return to 'normal' we need to remember that it is sometimes the 'good' things that are most dangerous. We can become so involved in our committees and good works that we lose sight of him in whose name we profess to act. We must be careful that we don't sideline Jesus.

What about the good ground? Receptive. Fertile. Like people with an open mind, prepared to hear, able to understand and put the message into action. Are we like that?

What about the crop itself? Notice that Jesus says some will bear a hundredfold, others sixtyfold, and still others thirtyfold. We are not all the same. We don't all have the same ability. Some people are capable of great things. Others have to content themselves with a more modest output. Others again feel the constraints of infirmity, or advancing age. Their working days may be past, but they have a valuable contribution to make in sharing their experience with others. All of us are part of the great scheme of things. God has made each one of us unique. We have different attributes, but we all have a purpose. We do our best, and allow God to bring the increase on the seed we sow. We may not all be equal in abilities, but we need to be equal in effort.

This parable is about what God is able to do in the world through the ministry of Jesus and the choices he sets before people – the seed he sows. If the results are poor it is because of the ground, or of the sower.

We've thought about the ground. What about the sower? This parable also has something to say to those who preach the word of God. Jesus doesn't explain who the sower is – we assume he means Jesus, or God. Jesus is the Sower – but he is also the seed--the Word of God – "The Word became flesh and lived among us." (John 1:14). Surely every Minister, every faithful Christian preacher – *any Christian* - is a sower? Might this even be part of the Great Commission that Jesus lays on the disciples:

"Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation." (Mark 16:15)

There is a lot of encouragement in this parable - encouragement for the disciples, and for us. Don't give up! The results may be slow to appear but the harvest is sure! When we sow the seed of the word of God, we do not know what the effect or the outcome will be. We sow the Word faithfully and we leave the rest to God.

In the second part of our reading Jesus does explain the parable to his disciples, but he still leaves us some thorny questions to answer!

Ask yourself, who does qualify as "good soil"? Who will hear and understand and bear fruit? Not the ones we might expect! Jesus seems to be saying that the people that the world does not rate will go ahead of the 'respectable' people and religious leaders of the day into heaven!

What then about the hardened, rocky, and thorny soil? Any hope there?

This is not Jesus's point, and he doesn't even mention it – BUT what would plough, or a spade, or a hoe do for the "path" soil?

Does it take a plough - some upheaval in life, some crisis – like Coronavirus - to alter the attitude of the hearers? Or our attitude?

This parable asks us to take a good look at ourselves as individuals, and as a congregation, and as a linkage, and to ask ourselves some hard questions about our own motives, and the courage we have – or don't have - of our convictions!

We are Christ's witnesses in the world today. Does this story have anything to say to us about how we go about passing on the Word? Do we always play safe and speak about our faith only to folk who will happily listen and not question? Or do we keep quiet?

What about helping others? Do we keep what we have for the proverbial rainy day, or, in our own generosity, should we imitate the sower as he 'broadcasts' the seed?

The bottom line? We are the ground. We can *choose* whether to be good ground or poor ground, whether to receive the seed and allow it to germinate within us; whether to receive the Word, and put it into action, or not.

We are also the sower. Through Jesus' Great Commission to his disciples, passed down to us, we are charged with spreading the Word. We are the voice and the hands of Jesus in this place.

Let us go out there and sow the seed in faith, and leave the rest to God.
Amen. SDG.

(Offering) Hymn (4) 349 In our lives plant seeds

Dedication of Offering

Lord,
all that we have, all that we are, comes from you.
Our gifts, our talents, all our possibilities,
belong to us only because they come direct from you.
Help us never to take your gifts for granted,
but rather to use them to make you better known
to the people of our neighbourhood, and to the people of the world.
In your name we ask. Amen.

Prayers of Intercession:

All powerful God,
*Your kingdom come,
your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.*

We pray for the building of your kingdom, O Lord,
asking that the seeds of your kingdom may grow and bear fruit in this world of ours.
We pray for those who sow new seeds:
those at the beginning of a new life journey;
we pray for people embarking on new relationships,
for new friendships forming,
and for new lives: babies and their parents.
We pray for faith to carry them, and us, through the changes
that Coronavirus has brought, and will bring, in the world as we know it.

We pray for those hoping to go to a new school, or to university;
those beginning a new job, or starting again after the Lockdown.
We pray for those who have newly retired,
and for those who have lost their jobs or their businesses.
God of Strength and courage, strengthen their faith.
Grant open hearts, and nurture the seeds of new life to strength.
*Your kingdom come,
Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.*

We pray for those entrusted with the cultivation of seed that which was sown long ago:
leaders of nations and institutions of goodwill.
We pray for the Church – here and elsewhere,
in gratitude for your faithfulness in years past,
and seeking your renewing Spirit in times of uncertainty and change,
now and in the years to come.
We pray that in caring for what has been planted before,
we may have new visions of purpose and potential,
beyond mere preservation for preservation's sake;
and that, in the busyness of our lives,
we may never not forget that we are rooted in you, and that you nourish us unseen.

*Your kingdom come,
Your will be done on earth, as it is in heaven.*

God of Glory in all things:
your love heals and binds up the broken hearted.

Your Son suffered even as his kingdom was established,
and earth tastes death, even as the promise of new life is strongest.

*Your kingdom come,
Your will be done on earth, as it is in heaven.*

God of all,
these prayers that we offer, our hopes and concerns for the world,
together with the prayers each of us bears in our own hearts,
we trust in quietness to you.

Pause:

*Your kingdom come,
Your will be done on earth, as it is in heaven.*

All our prayers we bring in Jesus' name. Amen.

Closing Hymn (5): 363 We have a gospel to proclaim

Closing Words and Benediction

Like seeds broadcast on the wind,
may we go out into the world to sow your seeds of love
in every place we go.

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.