

**ORPHIR and STENNESS CHURCH**  
**Handout Service for Sunday 15<sup>th</sup> November, 2020; Proper 28A**

**Introduction:**

In the present circumstances of the Coronavirus pandemic, when we are unable to hold our Church services, we think of other Christian people here, and 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 who would like to receive these services and is not on the list, 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**

Today we think about the parable of the talents and what it means for us; about the choices we face every day about how to live our lives; and about how to deal with the temptation to think negatively.

We pause in a moment of quietness, and know the presence of God among us.

This day God summons us, and calls us to account.

We bring to him our joys and our sorrows, our successes and failures;  
we lay open our hearts, our hands, our lives to God's judgement and mercy and love.  
Our trust is in the Lord, who puts his trust in us. Amen.

**Call to worship**

Be children of light. Be children of day.  
Come now and worship. Come now and pray.  
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, for the presence of the Lord

**Opening Prayer and Lord's Prayer**

We come before God at the end of one week, and the beginning of another,  
one week very like another in these strange and worrying times,  
separated, perhaps, only by marking our Sundays.

We come before the Lord of days and decades, of seconds and centuries,  
the God of all time and space,  
who has been with his people throughout the ages,  
the God who promised to be with us until the end of time;  
God who is with us now.

We give thanks that, in his presence, we are never alone;  
that his love has held us from seed to personhood,  
and his grace has permeated our lives, never letting us go.  
The hope he brings us leads us on, encouraging us to find him  
in ever new and ever surprising ways.

We acknowledge that sometimes our faith and trust falter.  
We look at our lives, and our world, and we don't like what we see.  
We are impatient, ungrateful and angry;  
without a clear plan, our ideas and good intentions fall apart,  
and we question whether there is any purpose to anything.  
When we become complacent or downhearted  
may we learn anew to count our blessings,

and, in counting our own blessings,  
we pray for others who need the blessing of God.

As God calls us to be ready, we remember that he supports us  
in using all that we have, and all that we are,  
our talents, the gifts we have been given, and the people that he has made us.

In the assurance that God accepts us and loves us,  
may our lives and our living be used in his service and in the service of other people  
to build a better world, a world that reflects glory.

In this time of worship, and in the week ahead,  
may we be reminded of the promise that God will never leave us nor forsake us.  
May we renew our trust in him, and commit ourselves again to his service.  
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): 351** Jesus' hands were kind hands

**Readings:**

**Ps. 90:1-8 and 12; NRSVA:**

**God's Eternity and Human Frailty: A Prayer of Moses, the man of God.**

Lord, you have been our dwelling-place  
in all generations.

Before the mountains were brought forth,  
or ever you had formed the earth and the world,  
from everlasting to everlasting you are God.

You turn us back to dust,  
and say, 'Turn back, you mortals.'  
For a thousand years in your sight  
are like yesterday when it is past,  
or like a watch in the night.

You sweep them away; they are like a dream,  
like grass that is renewed in the morning;  
in the morning it flourishes and is renewed;  
in the evening it fades and withers.

For we are consumed by your anger;  
by your wrath we are overwhelmed.  
You have set our iniquities before you,  
our secret sins in the light of your countenance.

So teach us to count our days  
that we may gain a wise heart.

**1 Thessalonians 5:1-11; NRSVA:**

Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers and sisters, you do not need to have  
anything written to you. For you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come  
like a thief in the night. When they say, 'There is peace and security', then sudden

destruction will come upon them, as labour pains come upon a pregnant woman, and there will be no escape! But you, beloved, are not in darkness, for that day to surprise you like a thief; for you are all children of light and children of the day; we are not of the night or of darkness. So then, let us not fall asleep as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober; for those who sleep sleep at night, and those who are drunk get drunk at night. But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, and put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation. For God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him. Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing.

**Contemporary Reading: *God, how would you have me be of service today?***

In his book *Power for Life*, ordained minister and spiritual life teacher David Preston Sharp writes:

***God how would you have me be of service today?***

Today, do the work that your soul calls you to do.  
Move forward with the lifework you know you are here for.  
Remember that your work benefits and blesses others.  
Remember also that you have been blessed by the efforts, work, and life callings of others.  
Be confident that I will accomplish my work through you.  
Be excited for your chosen work. Do it with grace and appreciation.  
Infuse it with love and light, and give it to the world.

**Hymn (3): 159** Lord for the years

**Gospel Reading: Matthew 25:14-30 (NRSVA): The Parable of the Talents**

'For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money.

After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. Then the one who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five more talents, saying, "Master, you handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five more talents." His master said to him, "Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master." And the one with the two talents also came forward, saying, "Master, you handed over to me two talents; see, I have made two more talents." His master said to him, "Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master." Then the one who had received the one talent also came forward, saying, "Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours."

But his master replied, "You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter? Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest. So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

## Message

The King James Version of our reading from Matthew's Gospel ends: "There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

No doubt you will have heard the story of the minister expounding on this verse when he heard somebody in the congregation mutter, "I dinna hae ony teeth!" The minister responded, "Teeth will be provided."

This is another of Jesus's parables, these spontaneous, spur-of-the-moment stories, meant to have one immediate, powerful straight between the eyes point. Here it seems clear that the original intention of this parable was to draw attention to the useless servant. However, like all the other parables, there are other lessons as well – lessons that come to you as you reflect at leisure on what seems a straight-forward story.

Jesus has been talking about the need to be ready for the return of the Son of Man. We must all be ready. As our Thessalonians reading tells us, "The day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night". Be ready!"

Once again, Jesus is getting at the scribes and Pharisees for their attitude to the law and to the truth of God. Just as the useless servant kept the talent buried in the ground, ready to hand it back to the Master exactly as it was, so the whole aim of the Scribes and Pharisees was to keep the law unchanged – "to build a fence around the Law", as they themselves put it. No change. No development. Nothing new. They were determined to keep things exactly as they were, with themselves administering it, calling the shots. For that they were condemned.

Do you know anybody like that? I certainly do. I met a lot of them in my previous career, and I have met a lot of them in the church too.

Jesus came with new ideas about God, and life, and duty to God. The religious establishment wanted nothing to do with his ideas. That's why they had him crucified.

There are several lessons in this parable. It is a very puzzling story. We take the Master to be Jesus, yet the picture is of a harsh man, reaping where he did not sow, and gathering where he did not scatter seed. Not really like Jesus. Furthermore, the Master suggests that the third servant could have got interest on the money – something forbidden under the Jewish Law.

Some commentators see hidden meanings, but parables were spontaneous and unrehearsed, so it is more likely that the immediate impressions are the most important. This parable has four obvious and very important lessons.

### **1. God gives us all different gifts.**

Some Bible translations speak about gold coins. Other translations refer to a Talent, and I think most of us are more familiar with that expression.

For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability.

Originally the Talent – the Greek *talenton*, Latin *talentum* – meant a weight, usually about 33 Kg, not a sum of money. Obviously, the value depended on whether it was gold or silver or copper. Usually it referred to silver, and the value of a silver talent was equal to 15 years wages for a labourer. So that first servant received the equivalent of a lifetime's wages.

For us, although not for the original hearers, the word talent has a double meaning. Although – and note carefully – that was not the intention - it is a happy coincidence that in our language we think of talents as special aptitudes or skills. We have all been given talents, and we are all different.

We are told that the servants were given talents according to their abilities. But they were not given them – they did not own them – they were entrusted with them until the day came to render account.

Different talents. It was not the money entrusted to the servants, and it is not the talents that we have that matter. It is the way in which we use them. God does not ask us to do things that are not in our power to do.

Someone once said that God does not want extraordinary people to do extraordinary things nearly as much as he wants ordinary people who do ordinary things, but do them extraordinarily well.

We are not all equal in talent, but we can – we must – be equal in effort.

We are told that the successful servant went to work at once, even though it was to be a long time before the Master came back.

We have to get stuck in right away.

## **2. The reward of work well done is more work to do!**

The two servants who had done well were not told to sit back and take things easy. They were “put in charge of many things”. They were given greater tasks and greater responsibilities.

## **3. The servant who was punished was the one who did not try.**

He didn't lose his talent. He just didn't try to do anything with it. Even if he had tried to make something of it, and had failed, it would have been better than doing nothing at all. There's a lesson here for those who undervalue themselves: for those who say, 'For all the difference I can make, it is not worthwhile even to try'.

We must all do the best we possibly can with what we have.

**4.** “To all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance, but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away.”

This part of the story used to puzzle me a great deal, until I realised how true it is in the context of what I have just been saying. If we do not use our talents, we lose them. 'Use it or lose it'.

I don't play golf – I have enough vices without that – but I am told that, if you do not practise, not only will you not get any better, you will lose any ability you had. The same goes for playing a musical instrument. A famous pianist once said, 'If I miss practising for one day, I know. If I miss practising for two days, my wife knows. If I miss practising for a week, the whole world knows'.

How many people learned a bit of French, or German, at school, then never used it again? How much do they know forty years later? Use it or lose it.

Those who have, get more. The person who develops those basic skills – those attributes – those talents – makes more of them. The little girl with a natural aptitude for playing the

violin works at her talent, practises, capitalises on her talent, and becomes a member of an orchestra, or even a Nicola Benedetti.

There is a story about an elderly lady who had a strange attitude to gifts. If she was given a present, she would thank the person profusely, and say that she would always treasure it, then put it away, unopened, in a drawer for another day. When a niece came to help her move house, she discovered many unused gifts, still unwrapped: biscuits and sweets and stuff mouldered away, or long past their use-by date; clothes that would no longer fit her. Lots of gifts, fit only for the rubbish bin. Because she did not use them, she lost them and never had the benefit of them.

In the same way, if we all use the supermarkets at the expense of our small local shops, we will lose them too. Life never stands still. If we are not going forward, we are going backwards. God's gifts increase through being used.

What's the bottom line? The take-home message?  
We must use our talents to the very utmost.

We hold our talents in trust, and we must be ready to give an account of how we have used them. We are expected to use them for the Master's work, whether in his service or in service to our neighbour.

If our talents are used, they grow. If they are not used, they don't. It is the same with our faith: it does not deepen if it is allowed to stagnate.

The Master expects us to be ready for his return, but he wants more than just passive readiness, more than just sitting around waiting. He expects us to be doing something productive while he is gone. I saw somebody wearing a tee-shirt with a slogan that some people might think irreverent:  
'Jesus is coming – look busy!'  
But there is some sense in the advice!

We all struggle throughout our life for whatever cause or motivation seems right to each one of us: for money, or recognition, or fame, or status – or for the satisfaction of a job well done, helping others. Doing good. Doing the work of Jesus. But how do we do that in our present circumstances?

We are living in very strange, and very worrying times. Much of our 'normal' life has been disrupted by the Covid-19 Pandemic. Maybe we are tempted to withdraw into ourselves and wait for it all to go away, or wish we could hibernate like a hedgehog or a dormouse. We need to remind ourselves that we are the voice and the hands of God in this place.

Even if restrictions prevent us from visiting other people, we can give some support to the needy and vulnerable among us. A phone call. A note pushed through a letterbox. A box with some groceries left on a doorstep. Shopping for somebody else as well as ourselves. The needs are there, but we may have to look for them.

And at the end of the day, there is only one reward, one accolade, worth having. Let us hope that we will some day hear those words:

"Well done, you good and faithful servant! Come on in and share my happiness!"

Amen. Soli Deo Gloria.

**(Offering) Hymn (4) 532** Lord you have come to the seashore

### **Dedication of Offering:**

Gracious God,

With our offerings we bring to you what is yours:  
our thanks, our praise, our hearts, our lives.

May all that we have and all that we are be used for your purposes, and to your glory.  
In Jesus' name. Amen.

### **Prayers of Intercession**

Loving God,

we give thanks for people whose gifts and talents inspire and bring joy to others,  
and for those who use their gifts to meet the needs of others.

We pray for those who, through unwise investments and decisions,  
have lost everything,

and, in the face of the Pandemic, we pray for people  
who have lost their jobs or their incomes,  
those who have seen their businesses dwindle away,  
through no fault of their own.

We pray for people in positions of responsibility,  
whose decisions affect the lives of others:

our government in London and in Edinburgh and in Orkney.

May we all have the grace to follow their guidance for the sake and safety of others.

We pray for people who take risks in the service of other people;  
for doctors and nurses and medical teams involved in the Covid crisis;  
paramedics and ambulance staff, police, and fire and rescue services.

We pray also for those who preach the gospel where it is dangerous to do so;  
those who speak out for justice though it could cost them their lives;  
those who denounce corruption though it costs them their livelihoods.

In this season of Remembrance,  
we pray for people facing violence in places of war;  
for those affected by violence in the home;  
for all those who are afraid.

We pray also for those who are afraid because they have done wrong,  
and fear the consequences;  
and for those overcome by their own sense of failure or inadequacy.

We pray for those whose fearlessness brings anxiety to others;  
for those whose thoughtlessness or recklessness endangers lives.

We bring before you now all those for whom we have special concerns today.  
Whatever their need, may they know your presence and your love.

*Pause*

Gracious God, hear our prayer.

We pray for your Church throughout the world,  
that Christian people will use your gifts generously, lovingly and to your glory.  
Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

**Closing Hymn(5) 497** Almighty Father of all things that be

**Closing Words and Benediction**

Go and share your master's joy,  
at home, at school, at work in the community, wherever you 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.