

**ORPHIR and STENNESS CHURCH,
Handout for Sunday 21.06.20; Proper 7A**

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 them – or sing them. God bless you all.

Gathering Words and Prayer

Today in our reading from Matthew's Gospel we learn more about Jesus's teaching about mission to the world. It is a bit of a health warning - Jesus points out that the disciples must expect opposition, perhaps even from their own families, but he reminds them that God loves and values them as a father.

First let us pause and be aware of God's presence.

'You are the centre, Lord, of my life'.

The centre of my life. Amid all my preoccupations, all the worries and hassles and concerns in my mind at the present time, can I focus for a moment on the centre of my life? Can I open my heart to God, my guide, my healer, my teacher? Can I stop for a moment and listen to God's voice?

Breathe in the breath of God. Breathe out your cares and concerns.
Breathe in the love of God. Breathe out your doubts and despairs.
Breathe in the life of God

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.
The steadfast love of the Lord is good. God's mercy is abundant.
Let us worship God.

Hymn (1): 511 Your hand, O God, has guided

Opening Prayer and Lord's Prayer

Gracious God,
Wherever we are, and whatever our circumstances today, we ask you to breathe your Spirit into our service and our worship.

In our prayers, may we speak to you
as we would speak to a close friend.

As we read your word, help us to understand it, receive it, remember it,
and put it into practice in our lives.

May we meet with you today, and then, even within the present restrictions,
go about whatever passes for normality in our lives
as those who have been with Jesus.

Loving God,
we thank you for everything

that brings us, and keeps us, close to you:
the influence of good and godly people;
the love of parents and others from whom we first heard your name,
and who taught us to pray;
for teachers who taught us truth and lived it out before us;
for all who led us to you.

We give thanks for our Christian heritage,
and the traditions which we dare not betray.
We thank you for all who love us, asking that we may be worthy of their love;
for all who trust us, that we may not betray their trust;
for all who believe in us, that they may not be disappointed.

In these times when our church buildings are closed to us,
we give thanks for the church here and world-wide that is the people of God,
the body of Christ.
We remember with thanks the friendships we have made through the church,
the strength we have received, the truth we have heard,
the salvation we have been offered and have received.

Quietly, in your presence, we remember with regret
times when we have got things wrong:
times when we have not put you first;
when we have failed to see the needs of our neighbours.
Lord, we seek your renewing power.

Loving God,
save us from the blind eye
which cannot see the tokens of your love in the world around us.
Save us from the dull ear
that cannot hear the whisper of your still small voice.
Save us from the insensitive heart
that fails to respond to the appeal of your love.

Lord, you have called us to be your disciples.
Thank you for trusting us with this privilege,
and for empowering us by your Spirit in the ways of service.
Thank you for giving us courage when we are fearful,
and for your strength in our vulnerability.
Thank you for knowing us, loving us, enhancing our lives.
Above all we bring thanks for your Son Jesus Christ,
for his life, his death, his resurrection and for the example he has left for us to follow.
All these prayers we ask in his name, as in his words we 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): 716 Come and find the quiet centre

Readings:

Romans 6: 1b – 11: *Dying and Rising with Christ*

Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin go on living in it? Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.

For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. For whoever has died is freed from sin. But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. The death he died, he died to sin, once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.

Contemporary Reading: *Talking Tough to God*

It isn't always easy to love and serve God. Being a person of faith doesn't provide us with easy answers to life's difficult questions – it may even make them still harder to struggle with. But God takes note and listens, God remembers us as his special possession. We belong to God.

How do you feel when you hear these words? Perhaps you have harsh questions to ask God, or reproaches to make. There are many troubling issues in our world. It's all right to speak tough to God – all the greatest prophets did this! Being honest with God about our negative feelings and our struggles can help to process and make sense of them. Is there something challenging that you want to say to God? Or does that feel too difficult – do you feel you need to be polite when talking to God?

Perhaps you need to make space for God to answer. Perhaps there are words of consolation and reassurance that God wants to offer you.

Speaking to God 'as one friend to another' doesn't mean engaging in polite conversation. It means being real with one another. What happens when you try this?

From *Pray as you Go*, 10.10.19.

Hymn (3): 187 There's A Wideness in God's Mercy

Gospel Reading:

Matthew 10:24-39 (NRSV)

'A disciple is not above the teacher, nor a slave above the master; it is enough for the disciple to be like the teacher, and the slave like the master. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household!

Whom to Fear

'So have no fear of them; for nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known. What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops. Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell. Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground unperceived by your Father. And even the hairs of your head are all counted. So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows.

'Everyone therefore who acknowledges me before others, I also will acknowledge before my Father in heaven; but whoever denies me before others, I also will deny before my Father in heaven.

Not Peace, but a Sword

'Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.

For I have come to set a man against his father,
and a daughter against her mother,
and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law;
and one's foes will be members of one's own household.

Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.

Message:

It would be very easy, and it is very tempting, to avoid these bits of the New Testament that warn us that people who follow Jesus are likely to have a bad time. We try to tell ourselves that these warnings serve as reminders of how hard it must have been to be followers of Jesus in the first century, but that there have been huge changes in culture and circumstances since then, and they are not really relevant to our world in Orkney in 2020. On the other hand, we can't just ignore this passage, or others like it. After all, why should those who have responded to the words "follow me" expect a different reception from the reception that Jesus received?

The disciples started out enthusiastically, but they very soon realised that putting their Christian faith into practice puts them out of step with the Jewish practices of their community and of their families as well. Nevertheless they continued to spread the Word. Maybe in our circumstances we don't have these problems, but there are still places where the Christian faith can cause division, or worse.

We are called to stand up for Christ and to confess "whose we are and whom we serve". It can be difficult in the face of the opposition and ridicule of the atheists and all the rest, in the face of people who don't care one way or the other, and it may bring us into conflict with political agendas. We may face social or political pressures to take a softer line, to follow the crowd. It must be particularly hard when the opposition comes not from nameless distant forces but from those closest to you, your own family and friends. It must be discouraging when, as we read in verse 36, the foes are from your own household. This has been part of the history of the people of God down through the generations, and in some parts of the world even today it is still the experience of many Christian believers, especially among those who convert to Christianity from another faith. There are still many places in the world where it is dangerous to be a Christian. Even though estimates vary widely, a brief search of the internet will confirm that a great many people are killed every year simply because they are Christians.

Our Gospel reading today begins with some blunt truths. Every secret will be disclosed, every truth will be told. Every hair is counted; every human life is valued. Certainly there is some rhetoric, some hyperbole, some exaggeration here, and maybe passages like these make more sense when you take them figuratively rather than literally. Jesus does not literally bring a sword. Maybe the hairs of your head are not actually numbered. We are not expected, literally, to take up a cross, but the challenge of discipleship is not to be taken lightly. The challenges are very real for many Christians in Africa and Asia and other parts of

the world, where following Jesus does indeed result in enormous familial pressure, where the realities of life are not all that far from the problems that Matthew's community faced. They need our prayers.

Jesus never hid the truth from his disciples, even when the truth was unpleasant. His path was the way of the cross, so those who follow him shouldn't be surprised when their way also proves hard. The warnings are daunting, but there is a reminder that it is a privilege to follow in the steps of Jesus. There is reassurance too. Time after time Jesus tells his followers, "Do not be afraid." They may be surprised and shocked to find that they face opposition and hostility, but it is no surprise to Jesus – to God. The assurance is there: no matter how far away he may seem at times, God will not abandon them. God watches over us all. His eye is on the sparrow; the hairs of our heads are all numbered (an easier job with some of us than with others!)

The analogy of the sparrows is well known, and well loved. It is interesting that Matthew tells us that two sparrows were sold for a penny. Luke's version is slightly different – five sparrows are sold for two pennies. A bargain offer: if you were prepared to spend two pennies you got an extra sparrow free. The extra sparrow was considered of no value at all, yet God cares for it too. The word used here for "fall to the ground" can also mean "alight on the ground". It is not only that God takes note when a peedie bird falls dead: God marks the sparrow every time it alights and hops on the ground. Jesus's argument is that, if God cares like that for sparrows, he will care all the more for men and women. The followers of Christ, those who speak out for him, have the assurance of Jesus himself that, whatever happens, they cannot drift beyond the love of God.

Maybe we think that the going will be too hard, and the rewards vague and far in the future. All very well to talk of a time when wrongs will be righted, when fake truths and alternative facts will be pushed aside, and the truth revealed. Maybe sometimes it is tempting just to accept the world view that this life is all there is, and that our health and comfort are the only things that matter.

At the present time, when the world is affected by the Coronavirus pandemic, when the death toll in our country is alarmingly high, when we all worry about our loved ones and about ourselves, not only in fear of the disease, but apprehensive about the long-term future for jobs and businesses and all the rest, maybe we have to think twice about the reassurances. It is in times like these that we need to remember Paul's assurance that nothing in the whole world will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. We need to hang on to Jesus's promises. We need to remind ourselves of Jesus's assurance that death is the end of the chapter, *but it is not the end of the story*. In the end, all the world can do is kill us, but Christ is conqueror of death. We need to keep the faith, and remind ourselves, and remind other people, of these promises. Yes, and we do need to take thought for the state of our souls.

The take-home message? Nobody said it would be easy. Jesus warned us that it wouldn't be easy. But we are assured that at no time are we alone in our difficulties. God will not prevent loss of hair, nor sparrows from falling, but he knows about, and cares about, each one. He will not do our job for us, but he will give us all the help we need.

Grief, fear, worry, conflict are a part of life. We are not immune, but we are at all times surrounded by the love of God, and he will never leave us nor forsake us.

Amen. To God be the glory.

(Offering) Hymn 402 Take up your cross

Dedication of Offering

Eternal and ever blessed God,
as we dedicate our offerings to your service
help us to give to you not only token gifts of money,
but also what you most desire,
which is the love of our hearts and the service of our lives,
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

Prayers of Intercession

God our Father,
we bring to you our prayers for people who are suffering in any way.
We pray for all those who, in recent time, or in time long past, but not forgotten,
have met with tragedy and injury and loss.

Help of the helpless,
we think especially of those affected by circumstances outwith their control:
by storm, and flood, and fire,
by earthquake and landslide;
by war, and oppression, and by terrorist activity.

Jesus said:

'Do not think I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.'

Gracious Lord,
these challenging words make us think of Christians in many parts of the world
who have to choose between
active opposition to tyranny and oppression, violence and bullying,
or seeking the way of peace through prayer and grace.

We pray for Christians everywhere,
especially for those facing discrimination and persecution in their everyday life;
rejected by families and friends for their Christian beliefs,
driven out, left isolated and alone.
We pray for those who are too afraid to acknowledge the encouragement that they find in the
word of God today.

In these unprecedented times of Lockdown and isolation in the face of the Covid-19 pandemic,
we pray for people desperately ill, struggling to survive,
and for medical teams treating them, nursing them, reaching to them in compassion,
even at risk of their own lives.

We pray for our governments in Westminster and in Holyrood, for scientists and advisors,
and those who have to decide on policy.

We pray for people who are unwell from any cause,
especially those who have been ill for a long time,
and for those facing surgery or prolonged treatment;
for people who feel that life has been too much,
beyond their capacity to cope.

We ask your comfort and strength for those broken by sorrow,
or preoccupied by memories of happier times,
or weighed down by the burdens of work and responsibility.
May they cast their burdens upon the Lord

and find in your all-sufficient grace the strength and the courage to carry on.

In quietness we bring to you the people we carry in our hearts today:
the sick, the sad, the worried; those in trouble of any kind.

Pause

We pray for ourselves that, by your grace,
and by any means available to us,
we may be agents of your love in this place.
All these our prayers we offer in Jesus' name. Amen.

A Closing Thought:

The theologian Alister McGrath writes:

One of the great themes of the Christian Bible is that, whenever God asks us to do something for him, he gives us the gifts we need to do it. Knowing us for what we are, he equips us for what he wants us to do.

— Alister E. McGrath, *Mere Apologetics: How to Help Seekers and Sceptics Find Faith*

Closing Hymn: 646 Forth in the peace of Christ we go

Closing Words and Benediction

May God who cherishes every sparrow, who goes in search of every lost lamb,
who embraces every lonely child, who dries every tear, and holds every hand,
guide you, sustain you and enrich your life;
and may knowing that you are valued be your joyful song today and always.
And the blessing of God almighty, the Father, Son, and 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.