

ORPHIR and STENNESS CHURCH
Handout for Sunday 22.11.20, Proper 29A (Christ the King)

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

This is the last week of the Christian Year, and next week we move into Advent. This is also *Reign of Christ* or *Christ the King* Sunday. Today we hear a familiar story that reminds us of our obligations to other people.

Let us pause for a moment and know the presence of God among us.

Gracious God

we thank you for the self-giving love of your Son.

Inspired by his example, may we be generous and compassionate,
looking for no reward other than knowing that we do your will.

We ask in his name. 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): 468 Son of God, eternal Saviour

Opening Prayer and Lord's Prayer

*Come, let us bow down in worship, let us kneel before the Lord our Maker;
for he is our God and we are the people of His pasture,
the flock under his care. (Psalm 95:6-7)*

As we gather today in our separate places,
through the Holy Spirit, may we recognise the presence of God among us.
In all the affairs of this day,
in our homes, in our community,
in our church, which is the Body of Christ,
in all the uncertainties of our lives at the present time,
we come in faith, bringing our praise and our worship.

Our God, our shepherd, never stops searching for his people;
his care for us anticipates our every need.
Before we recognised our need for his grace,
Jesus gave his life to draw us to him.

He is our shepherd, and we are his flock;
yet we acknowledge that there are times
when we have tried to push him to one side,

tried to take control ourselves, forgetting that he knows what is best for us.
We have been quick to plead with God for his help and care for us,
but we are slow to care for others people.
Not noticing, or turning a blind eye their needs,
we have not followed in the example of Jesus.

Yet we give thanks for the life, death, and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ,
rejoicing that all things are placed under his authority,
and that, in him, God's reign of love is endless,
and cannot be destroyed.

We give thanks for the community of the Church, the Body of Christ,
the family of the Church throughout the world.
We give thanks for one another, joined in Spirit,
and for the blessing of the love and friendship we share.

We come in worship before the Lord our Maker;
for he is our God,
and we are the people of His pasture,
the flock under his care,
and, with heart and mind and soul, we give thanks.

All our prayers we bring in the name of Jesus,
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): 159 Lord for the years

Readings: Ezekiel 34:11-16 and 20-24 (NRSV); God the True Shepherd

For thus says the Lord God: I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out. As shepherds seek out their flocks when they are among their scattered sheep, so I will seek out my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness. I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land; and I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the watercourses, and in all the inhabited parts of the land. I will feed them with good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel shall be their pasture; there they shall lie down in good grazing land, and they shall feed on rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord God. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice.

(V. 20): Therefore, thus says the Lord God to them: I myself will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep. Because you pushed with flank and shoulder, and butted at all the weak animals with your horns until you scattered them far and wide, I will save my flock, and they shall no longer be ravaged; and I will judge between sheep and sheep.

I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd. And I, the Lord, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them; I, the Lord, have spoken.

Hymn (3) 724 Christ's is the world in which we move

Gospel Reading: Matthew 25: 31-46 (NRSV): *The Judgement of the Nations*

'When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. Then the king will say to those at his right hand, "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me." Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?" And the king will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." Then he will say to those at his left hand, "You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me." Then they also will answer, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?" Then he will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me." And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.'

Message

As we have seen recently, there are times when Jesus seems to speak in riddles, when his words leave us struggling to understand what he means. This is not one of these times. In this parable Jesus's meaning is immediately apparent, and it makes uncomfortable reading: God will judge us according to how we respond to the needs of other people less fortunate than we are.

We tend to pick and choose the bits of Jesus's teaching that suit us best. Nowadays the idea of judgement is not popular. We don't mind quoting his warning, "*Judge not that ye be not judged*", but we don't like being reminded that we ourselves will be called to account.

We talk a lot about the God of Love. The reading from Ezekiel shows us God himself searching for the lost sheep, and looking after them with tender care, but it also shows us God judging between sheep and sheep, and his judgement on the fat sheep that butted all the weak animals with their horns and scattered them far and wide. The idea of God, or Jesus, as a judge jolts us out of our complacency. Today's readings tell us plainly that we are judged, not by others, not even by God, but by our own actions, or the lack of them. Jesus tells us that inasmuch as we act with compassion "*to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.*"

Our attitude to other people throughout our lives will dictate which side we will be on – whether we will be sheep or goats. So how do we manage delude ourselves that there will be no real consequences for the way we live?

In 2018, The Scottish Health Survey showed that 65% of adults were overweight, including 28% who were obese. I read a report recently that, in the UK, 250,000 tonnes of the food that goes to waste each year is still edible. That's enough for 650 million meals.

This at a time when the United Nations food agencies tell us that, around the world, 690 million people regularly go to bed hungry. The figures are sobering. World hunger is on the rise. With a healthy diet costing more than the 'international poverty line' of \$1.90 a day, people living in extreme poverty can't afford it. For example, across sub-Saharan Africa and southern Asia, about 57% of the population are unable to afford a healthy diet. In Sub-Saharan Africa, undernourishment is estimated at 22% of the population. Compare this with less than 2.5% in North America and Europe. Now the COVID-19 pandemic threatens to reverse decades of progress in the fight against global poverty.

Maybe we have become so used to the reports on TV of famine, and refugees, and human misery that they no longer register, but we can't pretend that we don't know what Jesus wants from us. We know perfectly well what the hungry, thirsty, estranged, naked, sick, and imprisoned people of the world need.

Maybe we tell ourselves that, in the face of such huge problems, there is little we can do. But Jesus tells us that the help we are to give is in simple, obvious, immediate things. Giving a hungry person a meal, or a thirsty person a drink; welcoming a stranger, cheering the sick, visiting the prisoner – whether literally in prison or in the prison of circumstances – are things that anybody can do. It doesn't mean giving away huge sums of money. It means giving basic help to people we meet – or hear about – every day. Like buying a sandwich or a cup of tea for the beggar sitting in the shopping precinct. I was reminded recently of the Random Acts of Kindness Foundation who tell us that kindness starts with one — one person, one act, one place, one city, one country, and one movement - with one goal in mind: to make our world a kinder place by one act at a time. That's something that every one of us could do.

Jesus tells us that our help must have no "ulterior motive". Uncalculating. The ones in the parable who did the helping didn't think they were helping Christ. They weren't looking for any reward. They helped because helping came naturally and instinctively. On the other hand, the attitude of those who failed to help was, 'If only we known it was *you* that needed help ...but we thought it was only some layabout, some scrounger who wasn't worth helping'.

There are people who will give assistance if they anticipate praise and publicity in return. But that's not simply help – it smacks of conceit. It's not really generosity – it is self-interest in disguise. Jesus says, "*When you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you*". (Matt. 6:3-4).

God wants help that is given just for the sake of helping. And there is a lot of it about. Orkney folk are well-known for gathering round when somebody is in trouble and for their response to charitable appeals. Unfortunately, the annual Children in Need fundraiser in 2020 has been another casualty of the Covid-19 pandemic, but in previous years it has raised in excess of £20,000.

Jesus insists that all the help given to other people is given to him, and that all help withheld is withheld from him. A very striking idea. Somebody said, if you want to please parents, help their children. The way to help God the Father is to help his children – our fellow men and women.

Two legends illustrate today's parable quite well:

Francis of Assisi was wealthy, and well placed in society, but not happy. One day he encountered a leper, loathsome and repulsive in his disease. Something moved Francis to throw his arms around the

wretched man, and, as he did so, the legend tells us that the face of the leper changed into the face of Christ.

Martin of Tours was a Roman soldier, and a Christian. One bitterly cold winter day he was approached by a beggar asking for alms. Martin had no money to give, but he took off his well-worn cloak, cut it in half, and gave half to the shivering beggar. The story tells that he had a dream that night – a dream in which he found himself in heaven, amid the angels, and among them Jesus, who was wearing half of a Roman soldier's cloak. Someone asked Jesus why he was wearing the ragged old cloak, to which he replied, "My servant Martin gave it to me."

The writer of the Letter to the Hebrews tells us: *Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.* (Heb. 13:2).

Maybe when you reflect on this parable you may wonder about the potential contradiction between the parable and Paul's insistence that we are saved by grace, and not by works. Matthew does not see this problem: he simply urges us to do what Jesus says. We should remember too that in the Letter of James we read, "*faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead*". (James 2: 17). Somebody said, "We profess our faith by our actions."

This is the last week of the Christian Year. Next week we move into Advent. Today is Christ the King Sunday. Today the Church remembers that Jesus is King and Lord of all. The vision of Christ coming in his glory, with all his angels, and sitting on the throne of his glory, with all nations gathered before him, is a powerful image.

Even though this has been a year like no other, and our interaction with other people has been reduced, nevertheless this is a time for looking back on the year and thinking of all the times Christ was present among us - even via our TV screens - in the face of the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick person, or the one in prison.

On Christ the King Sunday, we, as his Church, acknowledge Jesus as our King. When we do that, the Church becomes the Body of Christ. As the Body of Christ, it is our responsibility to work to bring life out of the death that is all around us, even without the effects of Coronavirus. We don't know when our country, and our church, will get back to normal, but we can be sure that it will be a different 'normal'. Maybe there will be less emphasis on the church as a building and more on the church as people.

Whatever our circumstances when the Pandemic eventually comes to an end, we need to be ready to pay attention to the real human beings with whom Jesus came to identify. Ready to recognise the presence of Christ in all those we meet, and treat them as we would treat him. Ready to show we care about the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, not because of the threat of punishment if we don't, but because to act in love is the right thing to do. Jesus told us to love our neighbour as ourselves. We are the voice and the hands of Christ in this place.

Maybe, if we can do that, we will open ourselves to the life that created us and redeemed us out of love, and know the joy of helping Jesus Christ himself.

Amen. SDG.

(Offering) Hymn (4) 544 When I needed a neighbour were you there?

Dedication of Offering:

To you, O Christ, our King and our God,
belongs all power, dominion and authority in heaven and on earth.
Accept, we pray, these tokens of our love,
and use them for your purposes.
and for the furtherance of your kingdom on earth.
We ask for your name's sake. Amen.

Prayers of Intercession

Loving God,
At all times, but especially in the Pandemic,
we pray for the world in which we live.

We pray for leaders everywhere
that they will tend their peoples as a shepherd looks after his flock.
Grant them wisdom, we pray,
that, by their decisions they may work together to overcome Covid-19;
and that they may tend the sick and injured,
strengthen the weak, and seek your justice in all things.

We pray for doctors, nurses, and medical teams,
and for those working to produce vaccines and effective medicines.
At all times, and particularly in times of fatigue and stress,
may they know your encouragement and your strength.

Especially when our buildings are closed or restricted,
we pray for our church, and for this congregation and community,
and for the wider Church in the country and the world.
May the love of Christ rule among us all,
so that other people may encounter Christ in us,
and come to trust in him also.

As we pray for others, help us to recognise you
in all those we meet who are in need,
and treat them with compassion.

Grant us, Gracious God,
a vision of our world as your love would make it:
a world where the poor and weak are protected, and none go hungry;
a world where the benefits of civilised life are shared for the good of all;
where different races, nations and cultures
can live in tolerance and mutual respect,
where peace is built with justice,
and justice is guided by love;
and give us the inspiration and courage to build it.
We pray in the name of Jesus.

(Read aloud together):

Lord, give us hands to set prisoners free
with hearts that love, and eyes that see
the needs of those who sit alone,
and those who wait, and those who groan.
Give us feet to go where illness reigns

and words to speak to those in pain;
may we bring hope to everyone
and heal and help through your dear Son.
This is our prayer; Lord, hear us now,
and guide our path, and show us how
to be your church through thick and thin
with open doors to welcome in
the sheep and goats, the lost and sad,
the rich and poor, the good and bad.
For we're all both, and need from you
huge love and grace to see us through.
Amen.

Closing Hymn(5): 251 I, the Lord of sea and sky

Closing Words and Benediction

Look into your heart, and know that the Lord is with you.
Look out to the world, and serve her needs.
Look up to those who are icons of hope.
Look down on the ground where you walk, for it is holy.
Go in peace to love and serve the Lord;
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.