

ORPHIR and STENNESS CHURCH
Handout for Sunday 26th. July 202; Proper 12A

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. If you are able to pass this on to someone who doesn't have internet access, so much the better. God bless you all.

Gathering Words and Prayer

Today we read again parables about a mustard seed, and yeast, and treasure, about a priceless pearl, and a net.

First let us pause, and remember that we are in the presence of God.

As we enter God's holy presence this morning, come, open your hearts and your minds to see the signs of God's kingdom all around us, and within us.

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.
Come and worship the living God

Hymn (1): 59 (Psalm 95) Oh, come and let us to the Lord...

Opening Prayer and Lord's Prayer

Lord God,
wherever we are today,
alone in our own place, or with others,
we know that you are here to meet us.
We remember that each one of us is unique,
with our own attributes and weaknesses,
yet, in you, we share a common bond,
gathering together as one body,
and we give you our thanks.

We thank you for the gift of your Word,
bringing us visions of your kingdom,
words for everyone,
to feed our hearts and minds,
and to set us again on the right paths.

God of love,
we come to you in awe and wonder
for our words cannot express our thanks
that you make us heirs to your kingdom.
As today we explore your word afresh,
help us to learn about treasures new as well as old,
and to remember the wonderful things that you do in our lives.

Lord God,
we acknowledge that sometimes we feel set in our ways,
reluctant to let go of familiar things,
or to turn from the things of our own little worlds
and to trust wholeheartedly in your promises
of life in all its fulness.
In anticipation of your renewing grace
we open our hearts and our minds to you

We would like to be your yeast in our world,
but we are fond of our own ways,
and reluctant to let you pummel and knead us into your ways,
reluctant to give up an easier life
to work for something that you call us to do.
Yet when we take our eyes from you
we feel lost, and confused, and uncertain.
As we open our hearts and minds to you,
undo the harm of our past mistakes,
pardon us and bring us back to you.

Our mighty and wonderful God,
on these summer days
even though we may be restricted by the Lockdown,
we are especially grateful for all the good gifts you give us.

Indoors or out, in town or country or by the shore,
with other people, or by ourselves,
we rejoice in the beauty of your creation.
We give thanks for eyes to see,
for ears to hear, a brain to understand,
and a heart to love.
Help us to see in all around us
signs of your kingdom
and to bring to you our joyful thanksgiving and praise.

All this we ask in the name of Jesus Christ, your Son, 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): 153 Great is Thy Faithfulness

Readings:

Romans 8: 26-39

In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God's people in accordance with the will of God.

And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters. And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.

More Than Conquerors

What, then, shall we say in response to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who then is the one who condemns? No one. Christ Jesus who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written:

“For your sake we face death all day long;
we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.”

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Hymn (3): 343 The reign of God, like farmer's field

Gospel Reading:

Matthew 13:31-33 and 44-52 (NIV)

The Parables of the Mustard Seed and the Yeast

[Jesus] told them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his field. Though it is the smallest of all seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds come and perch in its branches.”

He told them still another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into about sixty pounds of flour until it worked all through the dough.”

and at v. 44:

Three Parables

‘The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.’

‘Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.’

‘Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind; when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad. So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’

Treasures New and Old

‘Have you understood all this?’ They answered, ‘Yes.’ And he said to them, ‘Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.’

Message

Throughout the time of the Coronavirus pandemic we have been hearing about the growth and the spread of the virus, and we keep seeing graphs which show the line going more and more steeply upwards. We are told that this is exponential growth. I had serious difficulties with mathematics at school, and my grasp of exponential growth and geometric progression is less than rudimentary, but I get the idea that it means that the number keeps on doubling. If we think of bacteria - or spread of the virus - it means that one bacterium splits itself into two, each of which splits itself, resulting in four, then eight, then 16, 32, then 64, 128, 256 and so on. The mathematicians among you could no doubt explain it better, but it seems to me that it means getting bigger and bigger faster and faster. I thought about all this when I started reading the Gospel passage for today. It occurred to me that this would be a good illustration for what Jesus says about the kingdom of God, and how great things can grow from small beginnings – the mustard seed, and the yeast.

We have seen in recent weeks that Jesus told good stories, most often drawing his material from scenes and activities from ordinary, everyday life. He was familiar with the

countryside and with the agriculture and fishing and daily life of the times, and so he started with things that were familiar to his hearers, and led them into things that had never entered their heads. The parables we are looking at today tell us about several different ways to think about the kingdom of heaven, but the main point is very clear: the kingdom of heaven starts from very small beginnings, but nobody knows where it will end.

In middle eastern language, and in the Hebrew Bible, our Old Testament, a great empire was often pictured as a big tree, with all the subject nations shown as birds finding rest and shelter among its branches. The lesson is that the kingdom of heaven begins very small, but, in the end, many nations will be gathered within it. A little thought tells us that great things often do grow from the smallest beginnings.

Bread was baked at home, and the leaven, the yeast, was a little bit of the dough held over from the last baking, and which had fermented in the keeping. The point is that the yeast transformed the character of the baking, from something hard, dry, and unattractive, into soft, spongy appetising bread that was good to eat. As the leaven transforms the dough, so the coming of the kingdom of God brings a transformation in life.

Again a little thought reminds us of the transformation that Christianity brought to everyday life in the patriarchal society of Jesus's time. In his morning prayer, a Jew thanked God that he had not been made a Gentile, a slave, or a woman. Women of that time were considered of no importance, and had no rights at all. By contrast, here are lots of places in the New Testament that show us women occupying important places. In the time of Jesus, people on the fringes of society, the sick, the weak, the handicapped, even the elderly, those past their working days, were only a nuisance. Children too, especially girls, were an encumbrance until they were able to work or fulfil some useful function. Christianity brought a new worth to those sections of society.

We see that the parable of the yeast is about the transforming power of Christ and of his kingdom, but we may wonder whether it is meant to suggest that, like the yeast, the kingdom works unseen, that we must be patient and wait for its effects, but, nevertheless, God is indeed working his purpose out as year succeeds to year. How many people in our congregations and in our communities make contributions of time and talent that others take for granted, or quietly do things whose significance we miss until much later?

Or you may point out that the working of the yeast, the leaven, can be seen as it bubbles up throughout the dough, and that, in the same way, the action of Christianity often involves disruption and change. Jesus was crucified because he disturbed the established way of things, forced people to take a new look at the way they lived their lives, and at the values they considered important, and in doing so he antagonised the die-hards of the religious and political establishment. He asks us to take a hard look at how we treat other people. He did it in his own day, he did it down through the ages, and he does it now, and some people don't like it.

In the ancient world, when there were no banks as we know them, people used a hole in the ground to keep their valuables and most treasured possessions. (Some might say we would still be better off doing that!) Remember the worthless servant who hid his talent in the ground to keep it safe? So it wasn't all that uncommon to dig up buried treasure. We maybe think that the fellow who found the treasure and hid it until he had bought the field was guilty of sharp practice, but in fact, under Rabbinic law, he had the right to keep what he found, and in any case that is not the point of the story. The point is that the joy of the discovery of the treasure – the kingdom – made the man willing to give up everything else to make sure that the treasure really became his own. Notice too that the man found the treasure in the course of his daily work – and he must have been working hard enough, and digging deep enough, to find it. We need to remember that we find God not only in churches and on religious occasions but in our daily life as well as. In the Gospel of Thomas, which didn't make it into our Bible, we are told that Jesus said, "Split a piece of wood; I am there. Lift a stone and you will find me there." (Saying 77). When the carpenter is working with the wood, when the mason is working on the stone, when we are going about our routine everyday work, Jesus Christ is there.

The bottom line here is that it is worth any sacrifice to enter the kingdom of God. But what does that mean? Think of the prayer Jesus taught us: "*Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven*". That means that we are to aim at a society on earth in which the will of God is done as perfectly as it is in heaven, so to enter the kingdom is to accept and to do the will of God, and that is worth more than anything else. Remember too that Jesus said, "*The kingdom of God is already among you*". (Luke 17:21, The Message).

I am told that, in the ancient world, pearls were prized as the loveliest of all possessions, more valued than gold. That means that the kingdom, the acceptance and the carrying out of the will of God, is the loveliest thing in the world, above and beyond the beauty and the value of everything else, and it is worth sacrificing everything else to be part of it.

Jesus lived and worked among fishermen, so it is natural for him to talk in their terms. When the net, full of all kinds of fish, was drawn to the shore, the catch was separated, the good kept, and the useless thrown away. The net catches all kinds of things as it is pulled through the water. Maybe that is meant to remind us that our society, and the Church, are a mixture of all kinds of people, the good and the bad, the useless and the useful. Some people would have us believe – some people outside the church do believe – that the church is only for good people, fully committed, dedicated people, different from the world outside, or made up of goody-goodies who look down on everybody else. That is not the picture we find in the New Testament, which tells us that the Church must be open to all.

A story is told of a man who went into a certain church for morning service. He was dressed in shabby, grubby, working clothes, and as he sat down, people moved away from him in distaste. At the door, after the service, the minister said to him, "My friend, when you go home, you might like to pray to God and ask what you should wear to attend our church service." The next Sunday, the man reappeared, dressed exactly as before, and again the minister spoke to him at the end of the service: "Did you ask God what you

should wear to come to church?" "Yes", said the man. "And what did God say?" asked the minister. The man replied, "God said, 'I have no idea what you should wear: I have never been in that church.'"

The Christian Church, and the Christian community, are open to all, without prejudice. It is not for any of us to judge. The time for separation will come, but the final judgement lies with God alone.

After speaking about the kingdom, and after asking whether the disciples had understood, Jesus has a word to say about the scribe, trained for the kingdom of heaven, bringing out of his treasure-house things both old and new. Just as a scribe comes with a wealth of knowledge drawn from years of study, but nevertheless has his store of learning illuminated and increased by Jesus's teaching, Jesus didn't want people to forget all they knew before they came to him, but wanted them to see their knowledge in a new light and use it in a new way.

We all bring to our Christian life a variety of talents and abilities. Deciding for Christ does not mean concentrating on only 'religious' activities and giving up everything else, but rather using all that we have, and all that we are, to his glory. Amen. SDG

(Offering) Hymn: *To What Can the Kingdom of God Be Compared*; words below;
(tune 'To God be the Glory', CH4 512)

To what can the kingdom of God be compared?
A mustard seed falls where a field's been prepared,
And there, where predictable plantings should be,
There grows up a wild bush — as big as a tree!
God of love, here on earth, hidden things still surprise:
Loving deeds ... signs of birth ... faithful, Spirit-filled lives.
Your reign is amazing, your ways still astound,
Just like that new life springing forth from the ground.

A small bit of leaven will change the whole bread:
A poor woman sees that her neighbours are fed,
A church reaches out to the youth in the town,
A man shares his faith and God's blessings abound.
God of love, here on earth, hidden things still surprise:
Loving deeds ... signs of birth ... faithful, Spirit-filled lives.
Your reign is among us, creation is blessed,
When even a few faithful lives change the rest.

While some look for treasure or one priceless pearl,
God's reign is the gift wise ones seek in this world.
A girl sells possessions to help those in need;
A boy chooses faithfulness rather than greed.

God of love, here on earth, hidden things still surprise:
Loving deeds ... signs of birth ... faithful, Spirit-filled lives.
Your reign is a treasure that wise ones pursue;
May we seek your kingdom in all that we do.

by Carolyn Winfrey Gillette

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Dedication of Offering

Accept, O Lord, the gifts of our time, talent and treasure, however great or however small.
May they, and may we, be used to grow your kingdom. May our mustard seeds grow into bushes. Amen.

Prayers of Intercession

Lord Jesus Christ,

Our words fall short of our wish to bring to you our thanks for your goodness to us.
Yet we offer thanks for the promise of your kingdom,
your treasure, your pearl beyond price,
and for the promise that nothing in all the world can separate us from your love.

Loving God,

we bring our prayers today for all who are yet to hear the good news,
or who have turned away unheeding, and we pray
that you will continue to sustain all
who seek to make your message known throughout our world.

Be with ministers and missionaries,
chaplains, preachers and pastors;
with all who preach and teach your Word,
all who proclaim the God-given chance of a new beginning.

God of love and compassion,

We pray for all those many thousands of people throughout the world who suffer because
of the Covid-19 pandemic.

We pray for those desperately ill, and those on the point of death.

We ask your strength for medical teams
and for all who struggle to bring healing and comfort.

We pray for those places where available people,
and resources and facilities, fall far short of what is needed,
and for those who are exhausted or discouraged.

We pray for those who have lost loved ones to this disease,
or to any disease, or for any other reason.

May they know your comfort and your peace.

As we begin to see some easing of the restrictions,
we give thanks, and we pray
that you will help people to continue to be careful,
for the sake of others as well as themselves,
and, whether in regard to masks, or hygiene, or separation,
to accept advice and guidance about measures
to reduce the spread and the effects of the disease.

At all times, and in all places, O God,
support carers and counsellors, medical teams and mediators.
Be with those with listening ears and those with loving hands.

Be with all who in any way open people's eyes
to you, to your love and your call.

O God of the poor and the underprivileged,
the oppressed and the marginalised,
be with all who challenge injustice:
be with activist and pacifist,
protestor and politician,
with all who stand up for what is right.

Give to us the grace that, in our own small way, in our own circumstances,
we may be the channel through which divine love reaches out to someone else.

Loving God,
we bring to you those concerns that weigh heavy upon us today.

Pause

We bring all our prayers in the name of Jesus. Amen.

Closing Hymn(5) 470 Jesus shall reign where'er the sun

Closing Words and Benediction

Lord, it's not up to us to sort the bad from the good, the wheat from the weeds.
Rather, send us out to love everyone equally,
and to do everything we can to promote your kingdom.

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.