

ORPHIR and STENNESS CHURCH
Handout for Sunday 27th Sept 2020; Proper21A

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 them – 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

Lord, as today as we come in worship,
renew in us the discovery that we are your beloved children.
Amen.

Call to worship

Show me your ways, Lord, teach me your paths.
Guide me in your truth and teach me, for you are God my Saviour,
and my hope is in you all day long. (*Psalm 25.4-5*)

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.
Let us worship God.

Hymn (1): 457 All hail the power of Jesus' name

Opening Prayer and Lord's Prayer

In our own place and time, we join with other people,
friends and neighbours, people known and unknown,
united in our desire to worship God, sharing in our need for his renewing power.

We come trusting in his welcome, knowing that our God turns no one away,
and that, in this time of worship,
we are enfolded in the love of the God
in whom we live and move and have our being.

We come acknowledging that, in past days,
we have not been all that we might have been.
Too often we say one thing, but do another,
for we like to 'do our own thing', even at the expense of
closing our eyes and ears to the needs around us.
We seek the peace and renewal of God.

May the same mind be in us that was in Christ Jesus,
so that his love for all people may be reflected in our words and our actions;
that our light may shine before others,
that they may see our good works and give glory to God.

In these uncertain times, as restrictions continue,
as constraints are tightened or re-imposed rather than reduced,
we give thanks to God for his continuing love and care for us.
In faith, and in patience, may we learn again

to be the voice and the hands of Christ
to those in need, and to one another.
In care and concern, may we do all that we can
to prevent the spread of the pandemic that affects so many people.

Longing to return to normality,
yet realising that we may be faced with a new normal,
may we help build that new normal in the example of Jesus,
in whose name and in whose words we further 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): 356 Meekness and majesty

Readings:

Psalm 25:1-9 (New Century Version): A Prayer for God's Guidance

Lord, I give myself to you;
my God, I trust you.
Do not let me be disgraced;
do not let my enemies laugh at me.
No one who trusts you will be disgraced,
but those who sin without excuse will be disgraced.

Lord, tell me your ways.
Show me how to live.
Guide me in your truth,
and teach me, my God, my Saviour.
I trust you all day long.
Lord, remember your mercy and love
that you have shown since long ago.
Do not remember the sins
and wrong things I did when I was young.
But remember to love me always
because you are good, Lord.

The Lord is good and right;
he points sinners to the right way.
He shows those who are humble how to do right,
and he teaches them his ways

Philippians 2.1-13 (NRSVA): Imitating Christ's Humility:

If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,

who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself,

taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.

Therefore God also highly exalted him
and gave him the name
that is above every name,
so that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

Shining as Lights in the World:

Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure

Hymn (3): 501 Take this moment, sign and space

Gospel Reading:

Matthew 21:23-32 (NRSVA): *The Authority of Jesus Questioned*

When he entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him as he was teaching, and said, 'By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?' Jesus said to them, 'I will also ask you one question; if you tell me the answer, then I will also tell you by what authority I do these things. Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?' And they argued with one another, 'If we say, "From heaven", he will say to us, "Why then did you not believe him?" But if we say, "Of human origin", we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet.' So they answered Jesus, 'We do not know.' And he said to them, 'Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.

The Parable of the Two Sons

'What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, "Son, go and work in the vineyard today." He answered, "I will not"; but later he changed his mind and went. The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, "I go, sir"; but he did not go. Which of the two did the will of his father?' They said, 'The first.' Jesus said to them, 'Truly I tell you, the tax-collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax-collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him.

Message

The episode that we find in today's reading from St. Matthew's Gospel takes place in what we know as Holy Week. Jesus is coming towards the end of his ministry, and there is growing antagonism between him and the religious establishment. He is repeatedly asked to present his credentials to people who have already made up their mind that he is not "from God".

Here, not for the first time, Jesus wrong-foots his opponents. However they respond to his question, it could mean trouble. The teaching of John the Baptist about repentance was popular with the people. They heard John's message, and believed it. Jesus avoids

responding directly to the religious authorities, but the parable of the two sons is directed at them and their attitudes. They managed to dodge the question about John the Baptist, but they cannot avoid the question about the two sons.

Jesus's meaning is perfectly clear.

The Jewish leaders are the people who said that they would obey God, and then they didn't do it. Their deeds did not match up to their words. The Tax-gathers and prostitutes were the ones who said they would go their own way - and then took God's way.

In the section just before our reading, Jesus cursed an unproductive fig tree. The message there is that, if we do not produce fruit - if we are not fit for purpose - we are not doing God's will. Our knowledge of scripture, our familiarity with the history and doctrine of the church, may be second to none, but if our thoughts and our actions are cold, judgemental, exclusive, then we are not doing God's will.

To be one of those despised groups of people, but one who has turned his or her life around, and turned again towards God's grace, is better than being a self-righteous Pharisee, so obsessed by ritual purity and rigid obedience to rules and regulations, that common humanity is lost. The warning is as valid today as it was in Jesus's time. Jesus does not close the door on the religious authorities, but the challenge for them, and for us, is clear: repent, turn around, and then the Kingdom of God will come near. Don't just say it, do it!

There is a danger that Christian people can become blind to what God is doing in the world around them. We can become so involved in maintaining the institution that we call the church that we lose sight of its purpose. We can become so concerned with the past, with the way things used to be - the "aye been" syndrome - or so inward-looking, preoccupied with our own affairs, that we become blind to exciting new ideas, and reluctant to take up new opportunities. When the coronavirus pandemic eventually dies down enough to allow us to open our churches freely and safely, very likely we will find a lot of changes in the way we do things.

Look again at the two sons in the parable. Which of the two sons do *you* think did the will of his father? Those of us with families might answer, neither of them. We may think the first better than the second, but we can see faults in both. More to the point, we can see faults in both of the groups of people that they are meant to represent. The worst of it is, it is quite easy for us to recognise people like that. Maybe we know people like that. Maybe we are people like that. There are two very common classes of people in the world: those whose promises are better than their practice; and those whose practice is far better than their promises.

The first son is blunt to the point of rudeness; "I will not". But later he thinks better of it. The second son is polite, obsequious, even addressing his father as "sir" - but he says one thing and does another. Maybe he meant to go, and was distracted for some other reason, but the feeling of the story is that he put his father off with a polite answer, yet really had no intention of doing as he was asked. Easy to do. Very common.

How often have we heard tales of somebody who, as they say, would promise you the kingdom of heaven, but never come up with the goods? At its best, such people are unreliable. At worst they are hypocrites: saying one thing, yet doing another, like the man behind the *Holy Willie* in Robert Burns's poem - a man who set himself up as a pillar of the church, and a judge of other people, yet who was, in fact, a lecherous, drunken rascal.

A famous clergyman once said, "*The greatest handicap the church has is the unsatisfactory lives of professing Christians.*" Another, faced with a man whose life fell far short of his professed Christianity, said, "*I cannot hear what you say for listening to what you are.*"

Mahatma Gandhi put it more bluntly:

"I like your Christ, I do not like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ".

Fortunately, as we know, the reverse can often be true. There are people, like the first son, whose practice is better than their profession. People who grumble about not having time to do what they are asked, yet nevertheless get the job done. People who deny that they have anything to do with Christianity, yet live good lives.

It is often said that there are as good Christians outside the church as inside. No doubt that is true. But suppose, in time of war, a man says, "I am in complete sympathy with the aims of this war, but I will not join the army. Instead I will carry on a war all by myself, and go out and fight the enemy all alone." The likelihood is that his effort and courage will be wasted, whereas, if he joined with like-minded people in common effort, he could be far more use. If we are on the side of Christ, then our place is in the Church, joining with other Christians to carry forward the work of Christ to best effect. The whole is greater than the sum of the parts.

I guess we have all met people of both kinds:

- those who live a life very different from the sanctimonious piety of the belief they profess; and
- people who make cynical, even irreligious, declarations about what they believe – or don't believe – yet, in reality, live more Christian lives than many professing Christians.

It is better, like the first son, to say "No", then go and obey, than to say "Yes" and disobey. But better still to say "Yes", and obey in faithfulness. The really good person is the one whose professed belief and actual practice work side by side.

This parable teaches us something else. Something apart from the plain yes and no. It has to do with the manner in which the thing is done. It is perfectly possible to spoil a kind or gracious action by the way in which it is done. There are people who offer help, or financial support, but do it in such a way as to make you feel guilty. People who do what is necessary, but make such a fuss, or grumble so much about how much time and effort it is costing, that it would be better if they didn't get involved in the first place.

Ecclesiastes tells us,

"Whatever your hand finds to do, do with your might"; and in Colossians Paul advises:

"Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving" (Col. 3:23-24).

A fine thing can be done with a lack of graciousness and a lack of charm that can spoil the whole deed. The Christian way is in performance, not promise, and in obedience graciously and courteously given. In his letter to the early church at Philippi, where there was a big danger of disagreement within the community, Paul takes it a bit further:

Be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.

What Paul is saying is that living our faith as though it really matters means having the same mind as Jesus, the Christ who, leaving behind his former identity, and taking on the identity of the lowest in society, let himself be humiliated on a cross.

Paul continues into one of the most moving passages about Jesus in the New Testament. Some authorities believe that it is part of a hymn that was well known in early Christian

circles. The profound theology here suggests that the proof of the divinity of Jesus is that, although he was rich, for our sakes he became poor: for our sakes he was prepared to give up his divinity in order to share in our life and death.

The bottom line?

Those who follow Christ must always think, not of themselves, but of others; not of their own glory, but of the glory of God.

We owe obedience to the will of God. We have already made a commitment. That commitment, those promises, must not be empty words. They must result in action to further the cause of Jesus Christ in this place: action that is neither grudging nor half-hearted, but willingly, graciously, and courteously given.

Amen. SDG.

(Offering) Hymn (4): 468 Son of God, eternal Saviour (T. Blaenwern)

Dedication of Offering

For gifts given unwillingly, for service rendered grudgingly,
for lives offered reluctantly, we ask for your transforming blessing,
to take them, and to use them for good,
adding them to those gifts given willingly,
to the service offered freely,
and lives lived by love.
In Christ's name. Amen

Prayers of Intercession

Loving God,
oftentimes we feel moved to pray for others,
but sometimes we don't know how.
As we struggle to remember names or numbers or needs,
distracted by other issues that weigh heavily on our hearts,
we give thanks that, however imperfect our prayer,
you know what we mean when we pray,
and that the Spirit helps us in our weakness,
and intercedes with sighs too deep for words.

In that confidence, and in these few moments, we bring to you
those names and faces and images, those hopes and desires for others,
that spring to our minds in the course of each day:
the elderly lady at the bus stop, who needed a hand up the step;
the young mother at the checkout, trying to manage her two children,
as well as her trolley;
the young families who can't make ends meet;
people without work, unable to find new jobs;
those helping others to find work, in the face of all sorts of obstacles.

We think of teachers, struggling to cope with new restrictions
as well as the needs of their pupils;
of the doctors who want to give us more time, but have no more time available.
We remember people overworked and overstressed;
those with mental health issues, seeking help,
and those who are afraid or ashamed to seek help;
people who can't find the help they need.

We turn our minds to people known to us, and unknown to us,

who are seriously ill, yet separated from families who watch, and wait, and worry; those whose grief for loved ones who have died is intensified by constraints on funeral arrangements.

Gracious Lord,
we offer our prayers for all of these, and for countless others,
and for people known to us who are in special need today.

Pause

We know that you do not need to be reminded,
but we know also that you do need willing workers – even us –
to help all these people to know your love, and to supply their needs.
As we bring to you our prayers for people in any kind of need,
grant us also the insight, and the grace, to be part of the answers.
In Jesus' name we ask.
Amen.

Closing Hymn(5): 436 Christ triumphant, ever reigning
(Tune: *Christ Triumphant*; Mission Praise)

Closing Words and Benediction

May you go in the strength of God to meet the needs of others,
and to share his love.

May you know the blessing of God, stay safe in the way of Christ,
and may you be upheld by his Spirit today and always;
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.