

ORPHIR and STENNESS CHURCH
Handout for Orphir & Stenness, Sunday 28.06.20, Proper 8A

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 the words – or sing them. God bless you all.

Today we will be reading about and thinking about rewards.

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

I remind myself that I am in the presence of the Lord.

I will take refuge in His loving heart.

He is my strength in times of weakness.

He is my comforter in times of sorrow. 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.

The steadfast love of the Lord is established for ever.

His faithfulness is as firm as the heavens.

The Lord invites us and welcomes us. Let us worship the God.

Hymn (1): 184 Sing to the Lord a joyful song

Opening Prayer and Lord's Prayer

In response to his invitation, we draw near to God,
in the confidence that he will draw near to us.
Assured of the warmth of his welcome, and in the name of Jesus,
we bring our worship and our praise.

As the Spirit draws us into his nearer presence,
so we come, drawn by love, upheld by grace,
to encounter Jesus, our Saviour.
We know him as our master; we know him as our friend, and in him
we see the Father, whose love sent him, the Word made flesh, to live among us.
To Spirit, Son and Father,
we draw close in faith to offer our praise and worship.

In our own quiet spaces, we remember with regret
times when we have not followed in the example of Jesus;
times when we are ready to judge others, and to find them wanting;
times when we have seen the need of others, and have turned away.
We tell ourselves that we are too busy, and put off until another day.
Even within the constraints of these present times, our response has been lukewarm.

Yet, knowing that the righteousness and mercy of God are without measure,
and trusting in the forgiving love of God through Jesus Christ,
we seek the power of the Spirit to extend that love to all people.

Our God is a God of glory and strength:
happy are those who walk in the light of his countenance.

We offer him our thanks, our adoration and our praise.

We give thanks for all those who have welcomed us in the name of Christ,
who have offered hospitality and fellowship and friendship;
for hands held and hearts opened;
for people we have met as strangers and left as friends.

May we find the courage to give and to receive,
and the grace to be open to welcome, or to rejection.
So may God work through us, that we may be instruments of his purpose in this place.

We bring all our prayers in the name of Jesus, and 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): 122 Let all the world in every corner sing

Readings:

Psalm 13: *A Prayer for Deliverance*

How long, O Lord? Will you forget me for ever?
How long will you hide your face from me?
How long must I bear pain in my soul,
and have sorrow in my heart all day long?
How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?

Consider and answer me, O Lord my God!
Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep the sleep of death,
and my enemy will say, 'I have prevailed';
my foes will rejoice because I am shaken.

But I trusted in your steadfast love;
my heart shall rejoice in your salvation.
I will sing to the Lord,
because he has dealt bountifully with me.

Romans 6:12-23 (New Century Version): *Be Slaves of Righteousness*

Do not let sin control your life here on earth so that you do what your sinful self wants to do. Do not offer the parts of your body to serve sin, as things to be used in doing evil. Instead, offer yourselves to God as people who have died and now live. Offer the parts of your body to God to be used in doing good. Sin will not be your master, because you are not under law but under God's grace.

So what should we do? Should we sin because we are under grace and not under law? No! Surely you know that when you give yourselves like slaves to obey someone, then you are really slaves of that person. The person you obey is your master. You can follow sin, which brings spiritual death, or you can obey God, which makes you right with him. In the past you were slaves to sin—sin controlled you. But thank God, you fully obeyed the things that you were taught. You were made free from sin, and now you are slaves to goodness. I use this example because this is hard for you to understand. In the past you offered the parts of your

body to be slaves to sin and evil; you lived only for evil. In the same way now you must give yourselves to be slaves of goodness. Then you will live only for God.

In the past you were slaves to sin, and goodness did not control you. You did evil things, and now you are ashamed of them. Those things only bring death. But now you are free from sin and have become slaves of God. This brings you a life that is only for God, and this gives you life forever. The payment for sin is death. But God gives us the free gift of life forever in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Contemporary Reading: *Shelter* by Rev. Dr. D. Scott Stoner

'It is in the Shelter of Each Other that the People Live' – Irish Proverb.

If you are like me, you sometimes take for granted that you are fortunate to have a shelter—a home, apartment, or some kind of physical dwelling—a place where you get to live and sleep on a daily basis. I'm not always as appreciative as I should be about the fact that I have always been blessed to have such a shelter in my life. I am aware that I often take for granted another kind of shelter that I live in, and that is the shelter that the love of friends and family provides for me each day. It is this kind of shelter to which the beautiful Irish proverb that appears above is referring: "*It is in the shelter of each other that the people live.*" There are many ways we can provide the kind of shelter for one another that this proverb describes. As I wrote [recently], one way we can provide shelter is to truly listen to one another. We can also offer any, or all, of the following: compassion, love, patience, forgiveness, acceptance, and gratitude—all of which are forms of shelter.

This beautiful Irish blessing reminds us of the many kinds of shelter we can offer to one another.

May you always have...
Walls for the winds
A roof for the rain
Tea beside the fire
Laughter to cheer you
Those you love near you
And all your heart might desire.

Hymn (3): 231 For the fruits of all creation

Gospel Reading: Matthew 10:40-42; (NRSVA): Rewards

'Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet's reward; and whoever welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous; and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple—truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward.'

Message

Looking back over the last few Sundays, we remember Pentecost, and the coming of the Holy Spirit, and we thought about the concept of the Trinity. We have been led to think about mission, and what we might be called to do for the advancement of Christ's kingdom on earth. A fortnight ago, reading about the mission of the Twelve reminded us that we are expected to follow their example, and to proclaim the Gospel in word and deed, to move into the fields ready for harvest, and to pray for more workers. Last week we were warned that followers of Jesus will have a bad time, and that their mission will create division, even in their own homes. Today is a summing up.

Unlike Luke, Matthew doesn't mention the mission itself, so we don't know if the disciples did go out, or how they got on. It is suggested that Matthew wants to show that Jesus's words are directed at the audience, the readers – and that includes us. It is not so much a report of what happened to those early disciples as an indication of what is expected of those who are to follow – including us. Jesus puts a lot of emphasis on welcoming, not only about the welcome those sent out might, or might not, receive, but also about those who receive others on the mission. In this short passage Jesus uses the word "welcome" six times, and points us to the importance of hospitality in furthering his Kingdom. We are called to consider more deeply what it means to welcome one another.

Jesus is using a way of speaking that the Jews often used. They took the view that to receive a person's envoy, his or her messenger, was the same as to receive that person. To pay respect to an ambassador was the same as paying respect to the king who had sent him, and to give a warm welcome to the messenger of a friend was the same as welcoming the friend. This was especially true in giving welcome and respect to the prophets and messengers who taught about God. We are being asked to think about what it means to welcome one another. These three verses tell us that we should be, and can be, ready to welcome other people at any time, no matter our circumstances, or what problems we may be having. Jesus tells us that welcoming people doesn't need to mean big, extravagant acts. Any simple, basic acts of kindness that we may offer as genuine welcome for one another are all that God requires of us. All we need to do is to look around to see who is in need, and try to do something about it.

Maybe you remember the parable of the sheep and the goats. You'll find it in Matthew chapter 25, but I'm sure you remember the words: *"I tell you, whatever you did [or did not do] for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me."* Jesus is saying that the way we treat the most vulnerable people among us is, in effect, a reflection of our response toward him. In that parable, Jesus refers to these vulnerable people as "the least." We are reminded that righteousness goes well beyond our relationship with God. Whether or not we will be considered righteous has a lot to do with how hospitable we are toward one another, especially the most vulnerable among us. As people of faith, we are called upon to welcome other people in a way that moves us to be open, to trust, and to share, yet, at the same time, to be careful not to manipulate other people or to seek personal gain. The danger is that we start with good intentions, meaning to form caring relationships, but when left to our own devices, we sometimes fall short of creating and sustaining the kind of relationships that help us to become the people God has called us to be. It is all too easy to let pride, or self-interest, or self-doubt and so on get in the way and keep us from making really unselfish relationships with other people. As in so many other things we need the grace of God to help us.

It seems that Rabbis referred to their disciples as 'little ones'. In the same way, members of the early Christian communities were called 'little ones': children in faith rather than children in years; ordinary people as opposed to the wise and learned. Jesus is encouraging his followers to identify themselves with the little ones in the world, so that they, in turn would be called to serve other such little ones. For Jesus, the way we treat the little ones counts as worship. The way we treat them is the way we treat him. As we welcome them, so we welcome Jesus. Francis of Assisi said "It is in giving that you receive". Jesus said that it is in losing our life that we find it. It is in welcoming others that we experience the welcome of Jesus.

Today's Gospel reading emphasises simple things. The smallest of good deeds: a little thing done in love. Small acts of natural, unstudied devotion, of tenderness, and forgiveness, things that may go unnoticed, strengthen the relationships that are most important to us.

In the same way, the life of faith is also made up of many small gestures that are the more important in these strange and worrying times of pandemic and restrictions and lockdown:

gestures like making a phone call to ask how a friend or stranger is managing. Things like collecting and delivering groceries for the shielded and housebound - reaching out to the lonely and most vulnerable among us, who are maybe made the lonelier and more vulnerable by the present circumstances. In the eyes of Jesus there is no small gesture. He gives the example of a cup of cold water. The smallest of gifts, a gift that anyone could give, but in a dry land, or to a person really thirsty, a precious gift that might even be the gift of life itself. When we think of Jesus, we remember too what he had to say about living water. Jesus does not specify what will be the reward for those who help little ones. He leaves us to speculate. But in the kingdom of God, the smallest service brings with it eternal reward for the giver.

Most of us have never encountered an event like the Covid-19 pandemic. It has come as a great shock, and it has brought out the best, and the worst in people. Television has shown us doctors and nurses and health-care professionals in many countries working themselves to exhaustion, at great risk to themselves, to care for patients affected by this awful disease. People we had never heard of before are now familiar faces, explaining what is happening, and how best to keep ourselves safe and to look out for others too. The best brains in the country – in the world – are advising governments on how best to manage the disease. Yet there are people in important jobs who try to make political capital out of the crisis, people quite prepared to flout the rules.

We are being forced to reconsider how we regard the vulnerable among us, and how we feel about the inequalities in society. The death of one 'person of colour' in USA in appalling circumstances, and similar events elsewhere, have led to massive public demonstrations in support of those who face discrimination in any form. Perhaps inevitably, some people have sought to escalate the demonstrations for their own ends, and we have seen violence and wanton destruction, and looting. The grievances have mushroomed and spread to include not only those implicated in discrimination against minority groups in our own time, but also in times long past and in a very different society. Statues have been torn down and monuments defaced. There has been call for a rethink about the Kitchener Memorial on Marwick Head.

In the meantime, the economy of the country is suffering. Many businesses have closed; there is increasing unemployment, and the Lockdown seriously affects the lives of millions of people, and seriously disrupts the education of our young people. We hope – we pray – that things will return to 'normal' before long. But it will be a new normal. We all need to think hard, and pray for God's guidance, now and in times to come. Looking out for other people will be even more important. That includes ourselves and those close to us, but also the people who are struggling

The cup of cold water that Jesus mentions is a symbol of a small thing given, or a small action done, in love. It doesn't take much to be hospitable, welcoming, and accepting of other people. A small thing multiplied into a host of other simple, small deeds. Small acts of kindness. Jesus tells us that every single one of those small deeds is important – even eternally significant. Every one of us can achieve these things, and every one of us can make that difference. We can find God in those smallest of good deeds. The roles of the people who welcome, and the people being welcomed, are interchangeable. We are all called to be Christ to each other. As the Irish proverb has it: *It is in the Shelter of Each Other that the People Live.*

Jesus commissions us to share the Good News, to alleviate human suffering, to meet real needs, to work miracles of love and healing through acts of kindness - cups of water. We are called to remember that we, too, are to live as people willing to receive those same acts of kindness. We also need to be reminded that sometimes we can be a blessing to other people by allowing them to care for *us*, by being gracious in receiving hospitality and kindness from others, as well as offering them. When we welcome one another, we discover the reward that comes from the deep hospitality found in God's welcome of us.

Christ and his Church will always need great preachers, great scientists and doctors, great examples of saints in everyday life, but Christ and his Church will always need people in whose homes there is hospitality, in whose hands there is service to all, in whose hearts there is the caring which is Christian love.

Whoever gives you even a cup of cold water... will most definitely not lose their reward.

Amen. SDG

(Offering) Hymn (4) 724 Christ's is the world in which we move

Dedication

God of all grace,
You have given us more than we could ask or think. You have given us life;
you have given us all our fellow human beings;
you have given all that makes life worth living.
In gratitude we offer the dedication of all that we have and all that we are
for the service of your kingdom of justice and peace. Amen.

Prayers of Intercession

Do not fear to bring your pain to God.
Do not fear to bring your doubts, or your lack of confidence.
Do not fear to bring your worst, as well as your best.
Do not fear to bring your memories and your dreams, your hopes and your anguish.
God knows you and loves you. God will never give up on you.

We bring to God our prayers for others.

Lord Jesus,
you knew the love, and the problems of family life.
We thank you for our families, and for all the joys, and the frustrations of family life,
and we pray for your help and safekeeping for those we love.

We pray for all families who are suffering today.
We pray for families separated by Covid-19;
for those confined to their homes by illness, or by fear, or through medical advice.
Give them strength when they are struggling, comfort in their darkness,
and hope for times to come.

We remember too those awaiting treatment or surgery for other conditions;
those who are in constant pain, especially if they are suffering alone;
and we pray for those who are grieving.

We pray for all those who are having a bad time:
those who continue to work long hard shifts,
those working long hours, in hospitals...
in schools... in care homes... in their own homes...

We pray for children and young people,
trying to cope with restrictions they may not fully understand;
for children excluded from school, worried about exams and afraid for their future,
and for their families and those with responsibility for their education

We pray for businesses,

for employers and employees,
those returning work, but worried about their safety;
those who can't yet re-open their businesses,
those for those who fear that they never will.

As our society changes in the face of this crisis,
we pray that changes may be for the better.
We pray for those who face discrimination;
for those charged with enforcing the law,
and those who feel let down by the law.

We remember too as our thoughts occupied with Covid-19
the other troubles and tragedies continue all over the world, and in our own country.
War, and tyranny and oppression and corruption in many places;
people hurt in demonstrations against people being hurt;
three men dead and several injured in a terrorist attack;
three children lost in a house fire;
a father, son, daughter and dog on a walk killed by a drunken driver...
and so it goes on.
O God, we bring to you our world and all its troubles.

We pause for a while in our own places and spaces,
and bring to you our special concerns.

Pause

O Lord, grant to us all your strength in our struggles,
your comfort when we are discouraged,
your help in the days ahead, and your hope for the future.

In Jesus' name we ask. Amen.

Closing Hymn(5) 748 Through saints we glimpse the light of Christ (*Note – there are discrepancies between the music version and words-only editions, and between 1st and 2nd music editions. Doesn't matter today!*)

Closing Words and Benediction

Go in the name of Jesus, to follow in his way,
to love with his love, and to be sustained by his peace;
and the blessing of God almighty, the Father, the Son, 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.