

ORPHIR and STENNESS CHURCH
Handout for Sunday 29.11.20; Advent 1B

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

In ordinary times we might be lighting the first of our Advent Candles today. At home, we might still light a candle. May we remember another Advent occasion when we lit a candle of hope, knowing that in dark times there is always a light that can be lit, and that God is always calling us to justice, mercy and humility at this time of year, and at all times of the year. 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.
Let us worship the Name Above All Names.

Hymn (1): 282 Christmas is coming! The Church is glad to sing

Opening Prayer and Lord's Prayer

As we enter the season of Advent,
we watch, we wait, we look,
we long for God to dispel the clouds and the darkness
and awaken us to your glory,
that we may walk in his light,
and in the ways of Jesus Christ our Lord.

Even in these troubled times,
as we begin to look towards Christmas,
a Christmas, perhaps, like no other,
may we look again at the story that we think we know so well,
and, by God's grace, remember the true message of Christmas,
and find ways and opportunities to share it
with those searching, or waiting for answers,
and with those whose faith is faltering.
May we become open to the needs of others.

As we wait for God,
may we remember how he has helped us –
in the kindness of a stranger, in the comfort of a friend,
in the call for justice, in the shout for mercy.
May we approach God, and approach one another
with new vigilance, and with new hope.
We give thanks that in Jesus we have a Saviour,
a friend who promises never to leave us or forsake us,
and that, through him, we can approach God as Father.

Yet we remember times when we have turned our faces

from God, whose face is always turned towards us.
We have forsaken what we know is just,
ignored what we understand is true.
We are the clay in the hands of the potter,
made by him for his purposes,
yet too often we allow our busy-ness
and our preoccupation with our own affairs
to come between us and our God.

Knowing God's pardoning grace,
may we have the patience to wait on his word,
the sensitivity to hear it, the courage to act on it
and the wisdom to apply it.

As we acknowledge our barren times, and our doubts and fears for the future,
we give thanks to God for our memories
and for the comfort and hope they bring to us.
We commit to God our future,
trusting in him for the new things that will surely come.
To him be all glory and praise.

We bring our prayers in the name of Jesus, 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): 273 O come, O come Emmanuel

Readings:

Isaiah 64:1-9: A prayer for mercy and help:

O that you would tear open the heavens and come down,
so that the mountains would quake at your presence—
as when fire kindles brushwood
and the fire causes water to boil—
to make your name known to your adversaries,
so that the nations might tremble at your presence!
When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect,
you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence.
From ages past no one has heard,
no ear has perceived,
no eye has seen any God besides you,
who works for those who wait for him.
You meet those who gladly do right,
those who remember you in your ways.
But you were angry, and we sinned;
because you hid yourself we transgressed.
We have all become like one who is unclean,
and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth.
We all fade like a leaf,
and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.
There is no one who calls on your name,
or attempts to take hold of you;
for you have hidden your face from us,

and have delivered us into the hand of our iniquity.
Yet, O Lord, you are our Father;
we are the clay, and you are our potter;
we are all the work of your hand.
Do not be exceedingly angry, O Lord,
and do not remember iniquity for ever.
Now consider, we are all your people.

1 Corinthians 1: 3-9: Blessings in Christ:

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus, for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind— just as the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you— so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ. He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Hymn (3): 482 Come, let us to the Lord our God

Gospel Reading

Mark 13: 24-37

Jesus speaks of coming dark days when people will be close to losing hope. He urges them therefore to stay awake to signs that offer hope of the coming deliverance, which will certainly come, though at an unexpected time.

The Coming of the Son of Man:

'But in those days, after that suffering,
the sun will be darkened,
and the moon will not give its light,
and the stars will be falling from heaven,
and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.

Then they will see "the Son of Man coming in clouds" with great power and glory. Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.

The Lesson of the Fig Tree:

'From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

The Necessity for Watchfulness:

'But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. Therefore, keep awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.'

Message:

Today is the first Sunday in Advent, the first Sunday of the Church Year, the beginning of the new lectionary year. Our reading from Mark's Gospel, the second half of Jesus's longest speech, is known as the 'Little Apocalypse'. It is about the end of the old order, and about looking forward beyond suffering to the coming of a new world anticipated in Christ – "in those days, after that suffering".

In the original context, the 'suffering' refers to the aftermath of the Judean Revolt in AD 66, and the years of violent retaliation and mass devastation by the ruling Romans, culminating in the destruction of the temple in AD 70. The repeated warnings to beware, keep alert and to keep awake in verses 33 and 37 suggest that the community was to be wary of the 'Powers' and imperialism. The disciples were being instructed to wait and watch for the fall of these 'Powers', and to look forward to a complete transformation of the world.

Jesus gives a graphic description of the end times, the Second Coming, but, importantly, he gives no indication of when it is to happen. It is interesting to notice nonetheless that a lot of the things he prophesied were in fact happening.

In our time and circumstances, we associate Advent with preparation for celebrating the coming of Jesus at the first Christmas, while also bearing in mind his promise that he will come again. In both senses, Advent is a time to start preparing to meet God. Most of the readings preparing for Advent suggest that this is a sobering, even a terrifying, prospect, and maybe we are tempted to think we ought to be busy, so that God will notice and be pleased. A while back I saw someone wearing a Tee-shirt with the motto: 'Jesus is coming. Look busy'. Like when the boss appears on the factory floor or in the office, and everybody grabs tools or bundles of papers. For many of us, despite the Pandemic, this is a busy time in any case, and we don't want warnings that something scary might be coming.

The disciples must have been alarmed by Jesus's description of the coming of "The Son of Man" as a cataclysmic, end-of-the-world event. Maybe they suspect that The Son of Man might be Jesus himself, but they aren't sure, and they don't like this talk about judgement. Are they among the "elect", or not? Jesus does give some practical advice, but it is low-key:

"Beware, keep alert; keep awake."

No specific activity or busy-ness – just watch and be ready. The world is full of signs if you look for them. Sit still, but be ready. It's not easy.

This is a difficult Chapter. Mark, writing about 30-40 years after the crucifixion, was collecting together a lot of the things that Jesus had to say about the future, and he was writing about several different things at once. Jesus's words are especially puzzling: "*This generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place*". Some people will say that Jesus was simply wrong: if he was speaking about his own Second Coming "*in clouds with great power and glory*", then clearly he did not come during the lifetime of that generation. But he wasn't: in the next sentence he says: "*about that day or hour no one knows.*" Here he was referring to the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple by the Romans in AD 70, and the terrible persecution that followed. That did happen – and many of his hearers would be around to witness it.

Then Jesus goes on to speak about his Second Coming, and of the need to be on the watch. He emphasises that he doesn't know when he will come again. "*About that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.*" The early church expected Jesus to return at any time. After nearly 2000 years, we have lost that sense of urgency and expectation. Nowadays people either disregard the doctrine of the Second Coming completely, or they concentrate on it to the extent that they get it out of proportion. The Bible is quite clear that nobody knows, and nobody can predict, how and when Christ will come again. The doctrine of the Second Coming uses the imagery and the language of Jesus's time, and it is difficult for us to comprehend. There are things that

even Jesus left without question in the hands of God, so that should be a warning to all those who try to work out dates and times. How dare we try to enquire into something that Jesus himself was content to leave to God?

Yet a few years ago a Christian sect in America seems to have missed this message. Harold Camping predicted that the end was coming in 1988, and then in 1994, then that May 21, 2011, was to be Judgment Day, with the end of the world to follow on 21st. October. A lot of people sold their possessions and sat around waiting. We're still here, but I believe Harold passed on in 2013, after conceding that perhaps, after all, only God knew. Maybe he was one of the "*False messiahs and false prophets [who] appear and produce signs and omens*" to lead us astray.

All the same, notice Jesus's words, quoted by Matthew:
You will hear of wars and rumours of wars nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. And there will be famines, pestilences, and earthquakes in various places. (Matt. 24: 6-7)

Anything familiar here?

Jesus does leave us with practical advice. We are like workers who know that their master will come, but they don't know when. We need not live in apprehension or terror, but we do need to be ready. That means that each day's work has to be completed to the best of our ability, and we must live in such a way that it doesn't matter when the Master comes. We must be ready at any time to meet him face to face. When we think about it, we realise that all of life is a preparation for meeting the King.

We await the Day of the Lord. But there is a sense in which every day can be a day of the Lord, if, in Christian love and compassion, we can open ourselves to be the instruments of God's purpose in Orkney and in the world.

Writing about the Second Coming, New Testament scholar John Dominic Crossan has this to say:

"The Second Coming of Christ is not an event that we should expect to happen *soon*. The Second Coming of Christ is not an event that we should expect to happen *violently*. The Second Coming of Christ is not an event that we should expect to happen *literally*. The Second Coming of Christ is what will happen when we Christians finally accept that the First Coming was the Only Coming and start to cooperate with its divine presence".
(Crossan, J. D., 2007).

Remember, Jesus said:
The kingdom of God is among you. (or within you). (Luke 17:21).

Whatever your personal beliefs about the Second Coming, whether you believe that it will happen literally, or figuratively, or that it has already happened, is between you and God. For me, and perhaps for a few others among us, the Second Coming will come in a personal and individual basis within a few years. Meanwhile, we have to be prepared.

Advent speaks about the second coming, whenever and however it may come, but it also speaks to us about the first coming of Christ into the world. In Advent we begin the journey towards Christmas. We prepare to celebrate once again a birth that changed the course of history, that changed the world for ever.

Perhaps the restrictions will make it different this year, but for too many people the usual lead-up to Christmas is all about rushing and buying, rather than watching and praying, which is maybe where our priority should lie. We should be remembering what it is that we are hoping for. How can we be more alert and more watchful for Christ and for the signs of his Kingdom in our busy, stressful lives, and especially in the grip of the Covid crisis?

In Orkney we are usually spared some of the gross commercialisation of Christmas. We don't have to struggle through heaving city streets and crammed shopping malls. Maybe it will be different everywhere this year. All the less excuse for missing the hidden Christ in our midst: the Christ who calls out to us in the media appeals for charity; in the beggar hoping for the price of a meal; the lonely people, the people in isolation, people devastated by the death of a loved one; folk desperate for human contact, even by telephone, or a note through a letter-box.

Mark's message – Jesus's message - is clear. We are to be prepared, alert, watchful, ready, and waiting, because only God knows when the Master will return. The promised time of justice and peace comes by the will of God, and at the instigation of God.

But it does not come by divine will alone: because God has chosen to involve us. We are all called to be God's messengers. We are all expected to prepare his way. We are the voice and the hands of God in this place.

Even in these worrying and uncertain times – especially in these times - we are to live in such a way as to reflect the love and harmony of God.

We are to live in peace as a family: to live as the children of God: to live now as we may live in heaven.

These are thoughts to consider as we enter the Advent season.
Amen. Soli Deo Gloria.

(Offering) Hymn (4) 291 When out of poverty is born

Dedication

As we offer our gifts to God, may we remember those who are forgotten by us too many times – the hungry, the lonely, the homeless, the vulnerable – all important citizens in his kingdom of grace, justice, and hope. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

Prayers of Intercession:

God of Grace and Love,
into cold hearts and dulled minds
Lord, come among us:

Come, O come, Emmanuel.

Where there is no peace;
where people shout in the wilderness,
where people walk in darkness,
Lord, come among us:

Come, O come, Emmanuel.

In the darkness of winter,
and in anticipation of Christ's coming,
we pray, Lord, come among us:

Come, O come, Emmanuel.

To all who lead us in good times,
in bad times, in worrying times,
to those who make plans that shape our lives,
to our communities,
to all who support us,
to those who are there when we need them,
give courage.

Lord, come among us:

Come, O come, Emmanuel.

Lord, open our eyes to your presence among us,
that your church may be true to its mission,
that each and all may proclaim your goodness,
that, united as the Body of Christ,
we may show forth your glory.

Lord, come among us:

Come, O come, Emmanuel.

To nations who are looking for freedom,
to peoples longing for liberty,
to individuals striving for justice,
to all who are seeking to improve the world,
to all who are seeking to improve themselves,
Lord, come among us:

Come, O come, Emmanuel.

To all who are in need:

To the sick and the suffering,
in body, mind and in spirit,

especially to all who are in any way affected by the Covid pandemic,
those who are ill, and those who tend them,
to those who make decisions and decide policy,

Lord, come among us:

Come, O come, Emmanuel.

To the poor and the hungry;

To all who are oppressed and in darkness,
the lost, the lonely and those in despair,
to those who can no longer cope,
give courage.

To all who wait and weep for you,

to all those for whom we have special concerns today:

pause

That we may know that life is eternal,
that loved ones departed are in your keeping;

Lord, come among us:

Come, O come, Emmanuel.

To our homes, as we prepare for your coming,
to our loved ones as they reveal to us your love,
to our work, that it may show forth your presence,
into our leisure, and into our pleasures,
that we may rejoice in hope,
that we may come in your time into your glory,
Lord, come among us:

Come, O come, Emmanuel.

Hear us, O gracious God,
and according to your will,
grant our prayers,
in the name of the Prince of Peace,
Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Closing Hymn (5): 477 Lo, he comes with clouds descending

Closing Words and Benediction

As you go into the new week, may you stay safe in the way of Christ.
May his shine on you so that we may be warmed and strengthened;
to light your light all around.

And may 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.