

**ORPHIR and STENNESS CHURCH**  
**Handout Service for Sunday 4<sup>th</sup> October 2020; Proper 22A**

**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**

Today we hear another parable about vineyards and workers.  
First, let us pause for a moment and know that God is here among us.

As the gardener prepares and clears the ground for the vine,  
so that it may grow and produce good fruit,  
help us, O God, to prepare ourselves to meet with you in worship  
that we too may grow and be fruitful. 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): 200** Christ is made the sure foundation

**Opening Prayer and Lord's Prayer**

As, in our various places, we allow ourselves  
to be aware of presence of our Gracious God,  
we acknowledge the company in which we meet:  
the church on earth and in heaven;  
the faithful who worshipped in these Islands before us;  
the hundreds of thousands of every place and language  
who, on the Lord's Day, seek to set their lives  
within the atmosphere of renewing grace.  
As we think of them, let us take encouragement  
from the heritage that unites us with them all.

Let us acknowledge that, all round the world, people pray for us:  
and, without embarrassment, let us take heart  
from the knowledge that we pray for one another here,  
seeking not only our own peace,  
but the peace of our brothers and sisters everywhere.

As we cast our minds over the week that has gone,  
with its ups and downs, its kindnesses and faithful goodness,  
its mixture of the regular and the surprising,  
if there were moments of special happiness,  
or of particular sadness, or both,  
let us bring them all to God for his strength and comfort,  
and for his healing mercy,  
trusting that he will confirm

whatever is good and useful in our experience,  
and to transform or purge the things that are harmful and wrong.

In the assurance of God's renewing mercy and liberating grace,  
and knowing that we are accepted in his love,  
may we be inspired to show forth that grace in our own lives,  
and to extend to others the love which is shown to us.

Just as the Creator of all things deals with us  
with the patience and good humour of a loving parent,  
may we have the imagination and opportunity to deal similarly with our fellows.

In the generosity of God we are made confident  
that we belong in our Father's house and our Father's world,  
so let us serve as channels of his hospitality,  
ministers of his acceptance,  
angels and agents of that deep sense of liberated belonging.

These thoughts and prayers we offer  
in the name and Spirit of Jesus Christ,  
in whom the holiest in the height touched our hearts  
and shared our joys and sorrows, our circumstances, and our hope,  
and in whose 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): 549** How deep the Father's love

**Readings:**

**Isaiah 5:1-7; NRSVA: *The Song of the Unfruitful Vineyard***

Let me sing for my beloved my love-song concerning his vineyard:

My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill.  
He dug it and cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines;  
he built a watch-tower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it;  
he expected it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes.

And now, inhabitants of Jerusalem and people of Judah,  
judge between me and my vineyard.  
What more was there to do for my vineyard that I have not done in it?  
When I expected it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes?

And now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard.  
I will remove its hedge, and it shall be devoured;  
I will break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down.  
I will make it a waste; it shall not be pruned or hoed,  
and it shall be overgrown with briars and thorns;  
I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it.

For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel,

and the people of Judah are his pleasant planting;  
he expected justice, but saw bloodshed;  
righteousness, but heard a cry!

**Philippians 3:4b -14; NRSVA: *Breaking with the past:***

If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.

Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

***Pressing towards the Goal***

Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on towards the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

**Hymn (3): 644** O Jesus I have promised

**Gospel Reading:**

**Matthew 21:33-46; NRSVA: *The Parable of the Wicked Tenants***

'Listen to another parable. There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a wine press in it, and built a watch-tower. Then he leased it to tenants and went to another country. When the harvest time had come, he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his produce. But the tenants seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. Again he sent other slaves, more than the first; and they treated them in the same way. Finally he sent his son to them, saying, "They will respect my son." But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, "This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance." So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him. Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?' They said to him, 'He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest time.'

Jesus said to them, 'Have you never read in the scriptures:  
"The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone;  
this was the Lord's doing, and it is amazing in our eyes"?'

Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom. The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls.'

When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realized that he was speaking about them. They wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds, because they regarded him as a prophet.

## Message:

At Christmas time we tell people that the birth of Christ is "good news to the poor". That suggests that it might be bad news for those who are wealthy. Today's Gospel reading tells us who the bad news is for.

This is another parable - an allegory. The vineyard is the land of Israel, and God is the landowner. The tenant farmers are the Jewish religious authorities, the slaves are the Old Testament prophets, and the son is Jesus. The other tenants, who are invited to lease the vineyard at the end, represent the Church.

Jesus is warning the Jewish religious establishment that they have abused their privileged status. The Vineyard - the kingdom - is being taken away from the original tenants, and given not only to the Gentiles, but to "a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom."

Things don't work out well for these tenant farmers. They beat up and kill the prophets and then kill the son. They are not our idea of the kind of people who should occupy positions of power in the name of God. The message of this parable speaks to the Jewish authorities of Jesus's time, but it speaks also to us in our church, at this time, and every time. Straight forward, you might think.

The people hearing this story for the first time would have responded at different levels. Some would remember the story we read from Isaiah 5. The context of Matthew's story suggests that the chief priests and Pharisees made up a big part of the audience, and they would certainly recognise the background. The Jewish nation as the vineyard of God was a familiar prophetic picture, so they would know right away that the story is about God and Israel, and they would quickly realise that it is not about what the vineyard has done wrong, as in Isaiah's story, but about the tenants, so the story is not about the whole of Israel, but about certain people in particular. Somebody has suggested that they are projecting their own human instincts and ideas and instincts on to God; onto a God whom they do not know very well, as is obvious from the lives they lead. Making God in their image, you might say.

Do we do that? Or is our relationship with God obvious from the way we lead our lives?

Other people in the audience, perhaps less well educated, would be more interested in the story itself. To begin with, they would remember the hard labour that went into clearing a bit of land and planting vines, and the fencing and builder work, and they would sympathise with the landowner. But then he jiggers off to another country, and the audience begins to think that the landowner is only making a financial investment. Maybe they would joke about wishing they had so many vineyards that they could rent them out. There were lots of absentee landlords in the time of Jesus, so most of the folk in that original audience would have known more about demanding landlords than about unreliable tenants.

But these tenants weren't just untrustworthy. We might say they were crazy! There is no logic in their violence towards the slaves sent to collect the produce, violence that culminates in killing the son and heir of the landlord. Killing the slaves might buy them a bit of time to benefit from the produce of the vineyard, but they don't think ahead. They don't think of the increasingly heavy penalty they are stacking up for themselves. They can't see the final outcome at all. Did they really think that killing the heir would mean that the vineyard would be theirs? Why would the owner just make his son's murderers his heirs? Even before Jesus delivers the punchline, his audience knows what is bound to happen. Before he asks the question, '*When the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?*' they know what he will do.

The reaction of the chief priests and Pharisees is surprising. From their biblical knowledge they know that this story is really about the leaders of the people – about them, and we would expect them to reject Jesus’s interpretation, and to argue against it. We might imagine them saying, ‘That’s unfair! We are not like that at all! We have always tried to give God his harvest – all our laws instruct us to do just that! What do you mean that the kingdom of God will be taken away from us and given to others? You are the one trying to keep all the produce for yourself!’

Fast forward to 2020. How might we fit into this story? Can we imagine ourselves as the tenants? Can we see ourselves as the baddies?

The story that Jesus might tell for our time and place might end slightly differently. In our time and place, when the landlord sent for his produce, the tenants might say: ‘Oh yes, of course, you are due your produce, but we need to follow all the proper procedures.’ Or, maybe, ‘We have not been able to agree on the best method of harvesting the grapes, and, until we get the results of the arbitration process, we cannot work together’. Or else, ‘You are quite right, but the construction of the winepress and the watchtower ran well over schedule, and the cost has escalated, and there is an ongoing maintenance contract, so we have had to mortgage all the grapes for the next twenty years to pay for it all, so we are sorry, but there will be an unavoidable delay’. Perhaps even, ‘We’re terribly sorry, we couldn’t get people to help us harvest the grapes, so they have all rotted on the vines. Could you just send us some more helpers?’

OK. Sure. A fantasy; an exaggeration. But Jesus’s story was exaggerated too. In our reading from Philippians we see that Paul might have exaggerated and boasted about his credentials and his eligibility as a tenant for God’s vineyard, but Paul realises that he regards all those attributes as rubbish, compared with the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus as Lord. Instead, he is pressing on ‘towards the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus’.

There are lots of lessons in this parable. It tells us about God; about human nature, and about Jesus.

It tells us about God’s trust in human beings: the owner entrusted the vineyard to the cultivators. It tells us about God’s patience: the owner gives repeated chances to the tenants to respond to his appeals, but at last comes God’s final judgement in taking the vineyard out of their hands and giving it to others.

It tells us about human privilege. The vineyard was already equipped with everything that the tenants needed to make their job easy, and enable them to discharge their duty. God doesn’t only give us a job to do – he also gives us the means to do it, and the freedom to get on with doing it in our own way. Yet, ultimately, there is a day of reckoning: we are answerable for the way in which we do the work that God gives us to do. Not least, we see that the tenants were quite deliberately rebellious and disobedient towards the master. Sin is deliberate opposition to God – doing our own thing, despite knowing perfectly well what God wants us to do.

There are lessons about Jesus. We see Jesus arising from a succession of prophets. They were the servants of God: he was the Son. Here Jesus is claiming to be unique, different from even the greatest of those who went before. The story tells us too about the sacrifice of Jesus. He knew what lay ahead of him, but he faced it all the same.

The pictures of the stone come from the Old Testament. The lesson here is that Jesus is the foundation stone on which everything is built, and the cornerstone which holds everything

together. The ideas of being broken or crushed by the stone seem strange to us, but would be familiar to Jews who knew about the prophets.

There is another little bit of insight here. Paul was speaking especially to people known as the *antinomians*. These were people who insisted that, in the Christian life, there were no laws at all, that they were within the grace of God, and therefore it didn't matter what they did, because God would always forgive. No further effort, and no more discipline were needed.

We find Paul making the point in his letter to the Romans:

*Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin go on living in it? (Rom. 6: 1-2).*

Paul insists that, to the end of the day, the Christian life is the life of an athlete pressing onwards to a goal that is always in front. We must never take our foot off the pedal, never relax our efforts or lower our standards, but press on to our goal, until the very end.

It seems to me that there are lessons here for us all, and perhaps especially at this time of restrictions and precautions surrounding the Covid pandemic.

We are the tenants in the vineyard that is Orphir and Stenness, part of the greater vineyard that is Orkney. We have to tend that vineyard. That means renewing our commitment; keeping the faith; maintaining our standards, and looking out for one another, especially for those among us who might be particularly vulnerable. Even if we can't visit as we might like, we can keep in touch with people by other means.

All of us here, and every member of the church worldwide, made a commitment to the service of the church. Didn't we? Do we still honour that commitment, or have we defaulted on the payments?

Will we be ready to give the owner of the vineyard the produce when harvest time eventually comes?

Amen. Soli Deo Gloria.

**(Offering) Hymn (4) 564** Jesus loves me

### **Dedication of Offering**

Loving God,

We are quick to ask for our needs, and more,  
but slow to appreciate all that we have already received.

We are quick to bring our requests,  
but slow to show gratitude when they are granted.

We are quick to complain when life is hard,  
but slow to rejoice when it is good.

Loving God, forgive us, and receive now all our gifts,  
offered to you as our way of saying  
what we should have said so many times before:  
thank you for everything. Amen.

### **Prayers of Intercession**

Gracious Lord,

you have called us to know you, to love you, and to serve you.

Help us to be worthy of our calling, through Christ the living Lord.

You have given us the vineyard that is your world  
to tend it and to care for it:

we are your instruments in this place.  
God of the vineyard, help us to be good stewards,  
so that, rejoicing in your light and in your love,  
we may proclaim your power and your peace.

We pray for the church in all the world:  
for the church suffering persecution,  
for the church at work in dangerous and dark places;  
for churches that have lost their vision and their vitality.  
We pray for all who seek to bring the light of Christ to others,  
that we all may grow in holiness and in outreach.

In these troubled times,  
when our church buildings are closed or seriously restricted,  
we pray for all who are trying to find different ways to worship and to minister.  
We pray for your church in Orphir and Stenness, and throughout Orkney:  
may we all look out for others, especially for those most vulnerable.

We pray people brought low by disease or sickness, at home, or in hospital or hospice,  
and for those who treat them, and nurse them.  
We pray for people who are lonely, or depressed;  
those becoming discouraged and fed up with all the restrictions.  
We pray for all those who grieve for someone deeply loved,  
especially when we cannot conduct funeral services as we might wish.

We pray for the poor of the world:  
For people for whom the Covid pandemic comes on top of a continuing struggle for survival.  
We pray for those whose lives have collapsed around them:  
all who have lost possessions, or homes, or work;  
for people robbed or stripped of their dignity,  
refugees fleeing from one country to another,  
and meeting resistance and opposition;  
for those sleeping on the streets of our cities;  
for all who have lost hope or will-power.

At times when we cannot open our homes to other people,  
may we open our hearts.  
May we find other ways to support them in your love.

We bring to you all those for whom we have special concerns:

*Pause*

We pray for all who have died in faith;  
who know Christ and the power of his resurrection,  
for all who now share in his victory over the grave.  
May we who remain live as those  
who believe and trust  
in the communion of saints,  
the forgiveness of sins,  
and the resurrection to life everlasting.

All these prayers, and the unspoken prayers of our hearts,  
We bring in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

**Closing Hymn (5) 405** We sing the praise of him who died

**Closing Words and Benediction**

The hands of the Father uphold you  
The hands of the Saviour enfold you  
The hands of the Spirit surround you.  
May you stay safe in the way of Christ,  
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.