

**ORPHIR and STENNESS CHURCH**  
**Handout for Sunday 10.05.20; Easter 5A**

**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. God bless you all.

**Gathering Words and Prayer**

Today we read some encouraging and comforting words from Jesus, and at the beginning of Christian Aid Week we think of the problems of people much worse off than we are. I will be using some material from their website. If you wish to donate to the work of Christian Aid you will find details on the website:

<https://www.christianaid.org.uk/give-money/make-donation>

**Let us Pray.**

Loving God,  
we seek your presence in the silence beyond words,  
looking to you for comfort, strength, protection and reassurance,  
breathing with gratitude, holding on to hope,  
trusting with faith that you are still God in the midst of the turmoil,  
and that your love reaches to the ends of the earth.  
Be present with us now as, in a moment of silence, we let go of the cares and the worries of the last days and weeks.

(Silence)

Amen. *(from Christian Aid Prayers)*

**Call to worship**

Gathered in our separate times and places, yet united in our fellowship, we join with the church in the country and in the world in worship and thanksgiving. Let us worship God:

**Hymn (1):** 200 Christ is made the sure foundation

**Opening Prayer and Lord's Prayer:**

Living God,  
our refuge and our strength,  
to you we commit ourselves, not only today, but every day.

Our times are in your hands: all our days are in your hands,  
but this day we wait upon you:  
we wait on your word: your living Word;  
we wait on your spirit: your truthful Spirit;  
we wait on your life: your Gift.

God of heaven and earth, in these times of isolation,  
separated from loved ones, and from friends and from neighbours  
thank you that there is nothing in all of creation,  
not even coronavirus,

that is able to separate us from your love.

May your love, the love that never fails, continue to be shared through the kindness of strangers looking out for each other, to neighbours near and far, all recognising our shared vulnerability, each of us grateful for every breath, and willing everyone to know the gift of a full and healthy life. Keep us all in your care.

Fill us with hope as we wait upon you today, that we may be built up in your strength, knowing that, by your calling, we are your holy people, trusting in the knowledge that Christ Jesus came and lived among us, revealing the truth of your love and grace. Those who had no hope, he called by name. To those who had lost their way he said 'Follow me'.

Lord, as you have called us to walk in your way, make us the people you would have us be. Guide us that we may do what you would have us do, that we may reveal your truth, and help lead others to the fullness of life through Jesus Christ 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):** 739 The Church's one foundation

**Bible Readings:**

**Ps. 31:1-5 and 15-16:**

In you, O Lord, I seek refuge;  
do not let me ever be put to shame;  
in your righteousness deliver me.

Incline your ear to me;  
rescue me speedily.

Be a rock of refuge for me,  
a strong fortress to save me.

You are indeed my rock and my fortress;  
for your name's sake lead me and guide me,  
take me out of the net that is hidden for me,  
for you are my refuge.

Into your hand I commit my spirit;  
you have redeemed me, O Lord, faithful God.

My times are in your hand;  
deliver me from the hand of my enemies and persecutors.  
Let your face shine upon your servant;  
save me in your steadfast love.

**1 Peter 2:2-10, (NRSVA):**

Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation— if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good.

Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. For it stands in scripture:

'See, I am laying in Zion a stone,  
a cornerstone chosen and precious;  
and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.'

To you then who believe, he is precious; but for those who do not believe,

'The stone that the builders rejected  
has become the very head of the corner',

and

'A stone that makes them stumble,  
and a rock that makes them fall.'

They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do.

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light.

Once you were not a people,  
but now you are God's people;  
once you had not received mercy,  
but now you have received mercy.

**Hymn (3):** 579 Come, my Way, my Truth, my Life (St. Bees 51)

**Gospel Reading:** John 14: 1-14 (NRSV)

'Do not let your hearts be troubled.

Believe in God, believe also in me.

In my Father's house there are many dwelling-places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?

And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way to the place where I am going.'

Thomas said to him,

'Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?'

Jesus said to him,

'I am the way, and the truth, and the life.

No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.'

Philip said to him, 'Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.'

Jesus said to him,

'Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.

How can you say, "Show us the Father"?

Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me?

The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves.

Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father.

I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son.

If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.

### **Message:**

Early in my career as a vet I had the opportunity of a two-year contract in Kenya, working for what is now the Faculty of Veterinary Science of the University of Nairobi. I was 23, I had only once been out of Scotland, and never out of UK. It is an understatement to say that I had a lot to learn! I worked in the farm-animal practice run by the University, dealing with two lots of people: the poor African subsistence farmers trying to scratch a living, and the affluent expatriates - British, European, American, Australian and others - with quality livestock and horses. I learned a lot about society in a short time. One incident sticks in my memory.

I went to see a cow on an African croft. I asked for the usual necessities – bucket of water, soap, and towel. Somebody brought a basin with about an inch of cloudy water in it. Not best pleased, I looked questioningly to Paul Kinyanjui, my guide/driver/interpreter/assistant/friend. Paul quietly explained to me that, early every morning, the farmer's wife set off with a 5-gallon container, carried on a strap around her head, and walked 7 miles to the nearest water. She used a small bottle to fill the container from the river, hoisted it on her back and walked the 7 miles back again. A gallon of water weighs 10 pounds; she carried 50 lbs about 22.7 Kg - for 7 miles to serve the family as their sole source of water for the whole day.

It is over 50 years since that incident, and in that time Christian Aid and others have brought many changes for the better, but there are huge problems. At that time Kibera was a tiny village outside Nairobi: now it is the biggest slum in Africa and one of the biggest in the world. Climate changes over the years mean that water shortage is an increasing problem.

This is Christian Aid Week, and the website makes sobering reading. One of their examples reminded me of that experience of my own.

Rose Katanu Jonathan is 67. Every day, she battles to bring water home for her grandchildren. But drought and hunger are driving her to the brink. The severe drought has already lasted for three months, and she and many like her are obliged to walk long distances for water. The people are suffering, yet Rose still believes that God is her refuge and strength.

Women like Rose walk for miles to get water for their families. There is an earth dam just minutes away from her home which should be a lifeline. But many people in Kenya, just like Rose, are struggling to survive the drought, and, with such dire need, every last drop of water in the dam has dried up. When the rains do come, the dam won't be big enough to contain the water.

In 2019, the Kenyan Government declared a national drought emergency. With 2.7 million people without enough food, the drought is said to be the worst in decades. Droughts are now more frequent and more intense because of the climate crisis, and, without a reliable source of water, many communities are struggling to survive. Through local partners, Christian Aid supports people living in poverty to respond to, and adapt to, the climate crisis. Now, as well as all the other problems of poverty and disease, there is Coronavirus. And Kenya is just one of many countries with serious difficulties. From our Church association

with Malawi we learn about the problems there.

In our country we are rapidly learning about the realities of epidemic – pandemic – disease, but we are fortunate in not having the underlying problems that so many other peoples face. Many of us worry about relatives or friends in the medical and nursing professions who are literally risking their lives caring for people desperately ill with Covid-19, and it is no comfort to remember that, for many people in the world, suffering and disease and death are everyday realities.

Our lectionary readings this week are all written by, or to, people in distress: written for people who need the promise of a refuge, who need to know that help is near. The psalmist appeals to God for help. John observes the disciples wrestling with anxiety and loss. Peter reminds his little flock who they are, and to whom they belong. As we read and reflect on these passages, we remember Christian Aid's mission to end poverty. We believe that everyone is equal in the sight of God, yet we live in a world where poverty still persists. Christian Aid calls poverty "*an outrage against humanity [that] robs people of their dignity and lets injustice thrive*", and highlights what it is to live without refuge on the frontline of the climate emergency.

Chapter 14 of John's Gospel contains some of the most famous sayings of Jesus, words frequently used at funerals, words that have brought comfort and reassurance to millions of people, especially at times of bereavement, and they have been the inspiration for countless sermons. They have a special significance at this time for those who have lost loved ones in recent weeks and months, whether or not as a direct consequence of coronavirus. We have always believed in life *before* death, as well as *beyond* death, and we find in these words of Jesus both challenge and inspiration for this exceptional Christian Aid Week.

Jesus's words, '*I am the way, the truth and the life,*' take on new meaning in the context of coronavirus. Life seems the more precious life when we are confronted by our human frailty and vulnerability. We need to ask ourselves what new truths we need to face up to, now that coronavirus has shone a light on the weakness and cracks in our economic systems. How can all the nations of the world walk together to ensure fullness of life for everyone?

At some time, maybe after this crisis is over, we all need to face the questions that the response to the coronavirus pandemic prompts us to ask: questions such as how can we reimagine and recreate a world where no one dies of preventable diseases - diseases for which we already have vaccines and effective treatments. Why are there still more than 7,500 children under 5 dying *every day* from such diseases? These questions are always with us, but they take on a greater resonance this Christian Aid Week.

We take comfort in the words of Jesus: 'do not let your hearts be troubled'. These words were spoken to the disciples who had good reason to have troubled hearts; spoken by Jesus at the last supper, just after he had washed their feet with his own hands, talked of his betrayal, and of Peter's denial and his imminent departure (John 13). These words of comfort were offered for unsettling times, and are worth meditating on in these challenging times today.

Our Gospel passage raises some theological questions: questions about Christianity being the only way to God, and how these few verses have been used to justify a narrow-minded exclusiveness that does not square with the gospel of love that Jesus taught and lived. Here is a topic to think about and explore at another time. Likewise, Jesus's promise: *If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it* may seem hard words to reconcile with the prayers that seem to have gone unanswered in these difficult days. I imagine that they must have been just as difficult for the disciples to accept in light of the events that were shortly to follow.

Nevertheless, these are the words Jesus wants his disciples, his followers, to remember when he is no longer with them. These are the words he wants us to keep in mind. He wants his followers, including us, to come to him, as he comes the Father, bringing every cause, every concern and request, even if they can no longer see him, or be with him in person. These are words of hope and promise of connection for us all, now and always, but particularly in these days of 'social distancing' when we may feel very isolated. We may be separate, but we are never alone. Physical absence and separation do not mean that we are abandoned. As we come before God in prayer, he will bring us back to the way, the truth and the life, again and again.

The bottom line?

In Jesus we have a guide, an example, and an inspiration. Jesus will show us the Way. Jesus exemplifies Truth. Jesus offers us life – life in all its fullness:

*I have come in order that you might have life – life in all its fullness. (John10:10)*

Jesus said:

"I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."

Whether you've been a Christian for decades; whether your faith is faltering and you need spiritual renewal, or whether you will take that first step of faith today, the word of Jesus is clear for all of us:

*Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. ...*

*I am the way, and the truth, and the life.*

*Come to me and I'll lead you to [the] God.*

*Come to me and you will find the truth.*

*Come to me and you will find life, life in all of its fullness.*

Amen. Soli Deo Gloria.

**(Offering) Hymn (4)** 363 We have a gospel to proclaim

#### **Dedication of Offering:**

Great Giver of all good gifts, with these tokens of our commitment we offer you back our talents, our time, and all that we possess.

Transform them, along with our lives, into means of your life-giving freedom for all. In Jesus' name. Amen.

#### **Prayers of Intercession: *prayer for a global pandemic.***

*Love...bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends. (1 Corinthians 13:7-8)*

Loving God,

We pray that you will strengthen our innermost being with your love that bears all things, even the weight of this global pandemic, even the endurance of watching for symptoms, of patiently waiting for this to pass; watching while we pray, keeping our gaze fixed on you, and looking out for our neighbours near and far.

Instil into our shaken souls the belief and hope that through your creative love all things are possible:

for strangers to become friends;

for science to discover solutions;

for generous sharing of resources

so that everyone, everywhere, may have what they need.

May your perfect love, the love that knows no borders;  
cast out any fear and selfishness that divides.  
May your love that never ends be our comfort, strength and guide  
for the wellbeing of all, and all to your glory.

*A prayer for medical workers everywhere:*

Restoring and healing God,  
We give thanks for medical workers everywhere,  
embodying sacrificial love in these challenging times,  
putting the welfare of others before their own;  
staying away from their family and loved ones;  
comforting the concerned and bereaved, reassuring the anxious and vulnerable,  
and working to heal and restore people who are ill.  
Be their guide, their strength, their wisdom and hope.

We pray for your guidance for all those in authority.  
We pray that proper protective equipment may be provided,  
and that the dedication of all may be gratefully recognised.

We pray for medical workers around the world,  
where resources and protective equipment  
are always in short supply, not only now, but as a continuing problem.

May these extraordinary times lead to widespread and much-needed changes  
in how our world works, and to genuine efforts to address the profound injustice  
of life expectancy that is determined by geography;  
to awaken us all to the reality of how connected we all are,  
and to work together to create the community and the world  
in which we would all wish to be part.

Gracious God,  
Each one of us has special and personal concerns,  
for ourselves, for those we love, and for people who in any way need our support and our  
prayers, and we bring them to you now ....

*Pause in quietness*

Lord Christ, as you have gone before us and prepared a place for us,  
lead us, and those we love, until we come fully into your kingdom  
and walk before you in that life which is eternal.  
We ask in your name. Amen.

**Closing Hymn(5)** 646 Forth in the peace of Christ we go

**Closing Words and Benediction**

The guarding of the God of Life be on you,  
the guarding of the loving of Christ be on you,  
the guarding of the Holy Spirit be on you, every day and night,  
to aid you and enfold you,  
each day, each night.  
And 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:**

(Hy. 786) May the God of peace go with us as we travel from this place; May the love of Jesus keep us firm in hope and full of grace.

OR: 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.

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