

**Handout Service for ORPHIR and STENNESS CHURCH,
Sunday 11th. October 2020, Proper 23A**

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 the familiar story of a wedding banquet, guests who declined the invitation, and others invited in their place, and we find some advice and encouragement from Paul.

Let us pause for a moment and know that God is here among us.

A gathering prayer:

Loving God,
you gather us together tenderly, as a shepherd gathers the sheep;
you feed us, and you strengthen us with your living water.
In you we find peace.
Help us to accept the invitation to come to you;
make us willing to respond to your call, and ready to receive you now. Amen.

Call to worship

Let us exalt God and praise his name, for he has done wonderful things.
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.
*Rejoice in the Lord always; again, I say: **rejoice!***

Hymn (1): 14 (T. Wiltshire) The Lord's my Shepherd

Opening Prayer and Lord's Prayer

As we come quietly into the presence of our faithful and loving God,
we acknowledge that we do not always feel like rejoicing.
Even as we gather for worship, too often our minds are distracted and elsewhere,
weighed down by the burdens of our lives,
and by the cares of our present circumstances.
Yet, in this moment, may we find it within our hearts
to rejoice in God's constancy and loving care for us.
Therefore, let us rejoice.

We worry about present uncertainties;
we do not know what the future may hold, or where life may take us next.
We never know what is just around the corner,
and what may be the outcome of things that concern us,
but we take comfort in knowing that, whatever follows on from this moment,
God is here with us, by our side, above us and beneath us,
entwining his life with ours, in a love
that surpasses all human understanding.
In this moment, may God bless us and awaken us to his abiding presence.

We know that we are inclined to give up if something goes wrong,
or doesn't go our way;
that, at times, we are so overwhelmed by our own problems
that we forget to look out for others;
sometimes so consumed by negatives and endings
that we lose sight of positives and beginnings.

May we be forgiven for our self-centredness,
our blindness, and our deafness,
and may we be renewed by the Spirit.

We give thanks and praise for the eternal hope that comes from almighty God,
for his gentle compassion,
for peace within;
for his light in our darkness;
for hope when all seems hopeless,
and for love beyond measure, expressed in the life of Jesus,
in whose name, 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): 103 Fill our hearts with joy and gladness

Readings:

Philippians 4:1-9; NRSVA:

Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved.

Exhortations:

I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. Yes, and I ask you also, my loyal companion, help these women, for they have struggled beside me in the work of the gospel, together with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are in the book of life.

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.

Secular reading:

John Donne (1572 – 1631) was an English poet, scholar, soldier, and secretary, born into a Catholic family, a remnant of the Catholic Revival, who became a cleric in the Church of England, and later Dean of St Paul's Cathedral in London. This well-known excerpt comes, not from a poem, but from a sermon:

"No man is an island entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main; if a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as any manner of thy friends or of thine own were; any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind. And therefore, never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee."

Hymn (3): 552 Oh for a closer walk with God (Tune 2)

Gospel Reading: Matthew 22:1-14;; NRSVA: The Parable of the Wedding Banquet:

Once more Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying: 'The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son. He sent his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet, but they would not come. Again he sent other slaves, saying, "Tell those who have been invited: Look, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready; come to the wedding banquet." But they made light of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business, while the rest seized his slaves, maltreated them, and killed them. The king was enraged. He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city. Then he said to his slaves, "The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy. Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet." Those slaves went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad; so the wedding hall was filled with guests.

'But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe, and he said to him, "Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?" And he was speechless. Then the king said to the attendants, "Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." For many are called, but few are chosen.'

Message

Paul's Letter to the Philippians has been called the loveliest letter that he ever wrote. It has also been called the Epistle of Joy, because the words 'joy' and 'rejoice' occur again and again. Paul is writing from prison, probably in Rome in the early AD 60s, but nevertheless he is able to write: *Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.*

It was a time of difficulties within the Church at Philippi, and there are obvious lessons for us today, in these worrying times of restrictions in the face of the Covid pandemic.

At the time of Paul's letter, Philippi was an important place, with rich resources. It was a Roman Colony, founded by veteran soldiers and their families, sent out to settle in strategic places, and it was Roman in every sense, with Roman dress, Roman language, Roman customs.

We find the full story of Paul's stay in Philippi in the book of Acts - an interesting story for another day - but it ended in trouble and persecution and illegal imprisonment that forced Paul to leave, and a legacy of continuing persecution for the Philippian Church.

Paul has several purposes in mind: principally to encourage the Philippians in the trials they were going through, but also to appeal for unity within the Church, and, in particular, to address a dispute between two women who had quarrelled. We don't know anything about these two women, or what the quarrel was about, but it was sufficiently serious to threaten the peace of the Church. It is sad that, nearly two thousand years later, we know nothing about Euodia and Syntyche except that they had quarrelled! Here Paul is mobilising all the resources of the Church to mend the dispute.

Someone has said that a quarrelling Church is no Church at all, for it is a Church from which Christ has been shut out.

As an aside, it is also worth noting here that, despite the best efforts of the Church over many centuries to marginalise the contribution of women, this is one of several places in the New Testament that demonstrates that women were active in the ministry of the Early Church.

A number of themes run through the entire Letter to the Philippians. Perhaps the most important is the need for faithfulness to the Gospel. As Christ was faithful to death, and as Paul himself has tried to be faithful to his own calling, here, in the first verse of our reading, he urges the Philippians to "stand firm in the Lord". In this way they can look on both Christ and Paul as examples of Christian behaviour. Nothing should be allowed to undermine the faith that has nurtured these people.

Paul's second concern is a plea for unity in general, and in the specific case of Euodia and Syntyche. His concern is not only for the Church at Philippi, but for the developing church everywhere, and for the church in all the world.

The 17th century English poet and clergyman, John Donne, was Dean of St. Paul's Cathedral. His famous words, "*no man is an island*" were part, not of a poem, but of a sermon. What he was saying is that no one is self-sufficient; everyone relies on others. Human beings do badly when isolated from others. People need to be part of a community if they are to thrive.

We all have our failings, including Paul, as he is at pains to tell us. He gives us the unvarnished truth about his life, and the Damascus Road experience that challenged everything he had believed, to the extent that he sees his life in terms of what God has done for him. Throughout the Letter, Paul offers himself as an example to be imitated:

"Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me", he says (v. 9)

His attitude to his own sufferings and imprisonment, his rejection of all his previous values in favour of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and his single-minded focus on citizenship of heaven, together with the story of Jesus Christ as an outstanding example of obedience – all these he offers as a path to be followed. Paul has already mentioned these ideas earlier in the Letter, but now he adds three fresh lines of thought.

First, he writes: "*Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.*"

Maybe this reminds us about Jesus's 'do not worry' teaching in Matthew 6:

"*Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear*",

and his references to birds of the air and the lilies of the field. Together these words reflect a profound sense of confidence in the providence of God.

In their times of uncertainty, the future may have looked bleak to the Philippians. Paul encourages them to rejoice rather than worry. It may be something to do with attitude. The book *How to Stop Worrying and Start Living* by the American author Dale Carnegie is still on my 'to read' list, but a quotation from it is well known:

'*Two men looked out from prison bars,
One saw the mud, the other saw stars.*'

In our times, when people, Christians included, seem to be constantly worrying about everything and anything, and especially during the considerable problems facing us all at the present time, maybe we need to take another serious look at these assurances from Paul, and from Jesus himself.

The second theme reinforcing what has gone before is Paul's emphasis on God's presence, and the nearness of the coming *eschaton*, the final event in the divine plan; the return of Christ, and the end of the world. Clearly, the early Church expected Jesus to return at any moment. Some Christian people still do.

In 2011 a Christian sect in USA sat around waiting for the end of the world on 21st October. It didn't happen. For most people, after nearly 2000 years, maybe that idea has been pushed into the background. Maybe most Christians have stopped thinking about the return of Jesus, and the end of the world, as something that will happen at any moment. Some liberal theologians suggest that it has already happened. Maybe most of us think that Christ will come for each one of us when we shuffle off this mortal coil and slip from this world into the next. I leave you to decide for yourselves, but remember the assurance of Jesus himself: *"about that day and hour no one knows."*

The third theme is joy. Paul says: "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice".

We tend to overlook the fact that joy is one of the most important aspects of Paul's understanding of the Christian life. For whatever reason, there are some people who associate the Christian faith with a solemnity that regards joy as something trivial, lacking in dignity; not quite right. Sometimes it seems that in the Church of Scotland (and maybe even more so in some other branches of the Christian Church) we seem to have forgotten about joy. We have a tradition of black clothes and long serious faces, and mournful hymns, yet a gloomy Christian is a contradiction in terms. I'm not a great fan of the "happy clappy" style of worship, but maybe the more extrovert evangelical groups, or the Caribbeans, or the Africans, have the right idea.

Remember that Jesus said:

If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. (John Ch. 15).

For Paul, joy comes as an entirely appropriate response to the good news of God's action in and through Jesus Christ.

What are we to take from today's readings? The uncomfortable reading from Matthew's Gospel reminds us of the need to be ready and waiting for the call of God, and also that, although God wants everybody at the party, not everybody wants to come, or knows how to behave when they get there.

Paul gives encouragement and advice for our everyday living, especially in difficult times – and how badly do we need encouragement at the present time! Every day we have alarming and discouraging news about the progress of the pandemic, and repeated advice from scientists and medical professionals about how we need to respond. If that means following the government instructions about isolation, and staying at home, and wearing masks and all the rest, then we need to comply. At the same time, we need to look out for one another, especially for those especially vulnerable, or in any kind of difficulty. If we can't visit, we can telephone, or drop a note through a letter box.

Our short passage from Philippians is worth reading again. And again. It is a guide to everyday living, as relevant now as it was when it was written.

'Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.'

If we can try to follow Paul's advice, then

'The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.'

Amen. SDG.

(Offering) Hymn (4) 249 We have heard a joyful sound

Dedication

Lord,
everything that we have, all that we are, comes from you.
Our gifts, our talents, all our possibilities, belong to us
only because they come direct from you.
Help us not to take your gifts for granted,
not to bury them,
but rather to use them to make you better known
to the people of our neighbourhood,
and to the people of the world.
Accept now our gifts of money, and of our very selves,
to be used for your purposes.
In Jesus' name. Amen.

Prayers of Intercession

Loving God,
as we hear news of trauma and disease and heartache across the world
we try to comprehend the intensity of it all.

We pray for all those caught up
in the hurting, and in the healing.
We hear so much of death and dying,
of grieving and weeping;
we hear of pain, and scarring, and disfigurement,
of anguish and confusion.
We hear of those in need of help, and those who struggle to find it;
we hear of the grieving and the sorrowful,
of the lost and the alone,
and we know, Lord,
that there are countless others known only to you.
Bless them all in their hurting and their healing.

Lord God,
we come to you to pray not for ourselves,
but for one another:
for those we know, and for people we don't know;
for situations we understand,
and for situations that confound us.

Breath of life and love,
as the Covid pandemic continues,
disturb the dark clouds of fear and anxiety that trouble our lives,
and, as clouds disperse,
as your light shines out in this troubled world,
and breaks in and through our hearts and minds,
may we sense hope and healing.

We pray for all those whose day begins in anxiety,
as they leave the security of home,
worrying about the risk of infection.

We think especially those whose age or health places them at greater risk.
Be close to all whose tasks today includes the care of the sick, the frail, the elderly.
Loving God, keep them safe.

We remember our neighbours at this time;
not only those who live close to us, but all in the wider community,
especially those who are elderly, or especially vulnerable,
those struggling with restrictions,
and with isolation from the world outside their door.
May they know that they are loved
through our actions, and through the care of others,
and, in their loneliness, may they know also
your presence, your healing, and your peace.

Gracious Lord,
bless the good neighbours,
those who call to check that all is well with those unable to get out,
and whose gentle act of service brings a ray of the light of your love
into a day otherwise cheerless.
Bless all who give of their time for others, that, by following the example of Jesus,
they may help make this world a better and more caring world in which to live.

We give thanks for all those people whose daily lives are about giving;
whether through medical or physical assistance,
through teaching, training and encouragement,
and by loving, caring, supporting, praying,
for all the many ways in which
one life can be blessed and enriched by another.
For all these people we give thanks.

Help us, in our own lives, to find ways to help people in need at this time.
Help us to put aside all prejudice and preconception about other people,
and simply to accept that they, like us, are precious in your eyes.

At this time, in our own special places,
we bring to you those for whom we have particular concerns:

Pause

Enfold them in your love,
Through Jesus Christ our Lord,
Amen.

Closing Hymn(5) 449 Rejoice! The Lord is king (change to last)

Closing Words and Benediction

May you stay safe in the way of Christ in all the tasks of this week,
may you know the hope of Christ in all your concerns, and, at all times,
the assurance of the presence of Christ journeying with you.
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:

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.