

ORPHIR and STENNESS CHURCH
Handout Service for Sunday 13th September 202; Proper19A

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 a well-known story about forgiveness and consider what it might mean for us.

First, let us pause for a moment and know that God is here among us.

All-seeing and all-knowing God, communion with you unites all people.
Pour grace into our hearts, that we may draw closer to your love
and join together in praising your holy name. Amen.

Call to worship

Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name (Ps 103:1).

Gathered in our separate places, yet united in our Christian fellowship, we join our minds and our voices with the whole church, across the world and across time. Let us worship God.

Hymn (1): 63 (Psalm 100) All people that on earth do dwell

Opening Prayer and Lord's Prayer

Like the servant who owes far more than he can ever pay,
yet trusting in the boundless love of our generous and compassionate God,
from our own individual places, we come to him with our praise and our prayers.

We bring praise to our Creator God, who has formed us in his own image,
yet has made each one of us unique,
and has given to us all the freedom to be ourselves.
We celebrate our diversity;
we give thanks for our differences, for the variety of our gifts and abilities,
and for the many ways in which we can express our love to God and to other people.

In the presence of God, we reflect on the complexity of human relationships,
and we acknowledge that often we get things wrong.
Unknowingly, or knowingly, we hurt other people and say unkind things;
other people say and do things that upset us.
We give thanks that God does not treat us as our faults may deserve,
but, in the steadfast love of his compassion and forgiveness,
he shows us how to heal all that is amiss in our lives.

Through God's grace, may we know, and accept, and feel, his forgiveness.
In our relationships with others, may we, in turn, both forgive, and receive forgiveness.

Letting go of fear, mistrust, suspicion, unease,
may we find the way to healing and reconciliation,
so that the strong, compassionate love of God
may flow into, and through, all our relationships.

In these troubled and uncertain times, may we remember
that the will of God will not take us where his grace cannot sustain us.
We pray that God will support us in the face of everything that troubles and oppresses us.
In every difficulty may we remember Jesus's assurance:
I will be with you always, even until the end of this age.
In his name, and in his words, we pray:
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): 68 (Ps 103) O thou my soul bless God the Lord (T. Kilmarnock, 69)

Readings:

Rom. 14: 1-12 (NRSVA) Do Not Judge Another

Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarrelling over opinions.
Some believe in eating anything, while the weak eat only vegetables. Those who eat must not
despise those who abstain, and those who abstain must not pass judgement on those who
eat; for God has welcomed them. Who are you to pass judgement on servants of another? It
is before their own lord that they stand or fall. And they will be upheld, for the Lord is able to
make them stand.

Some judge one day to be better than another, while others judge all days to be alike. Let all
be fully convinced in their own minds. Those who observe the day, observe it in honour of the
Lord. Also those who eat, eat in honour of the Lord, since they give thanks to God; while
those who abstain, abstain in honour of the Lord and give thanks to God.

We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord,
and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the
Lord's. For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead
and the living.

Why do you pass judgement on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your
brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgement seat of God. For it is written,

*'As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me,
and every tongue shall give praise to God.'*

So then, each of us will be accountable to God.

Hymn (3): 486 Forgive our sins (Tune Stroudwater).

Gospel Reading: Matt. 18: 21-35: Forgiveness

Then Peter came and said to him, 'Lord, if another member of the church sins against me,
how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?' Jesus said to him, 'Not seven times,
but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.'

The Parable of the Unforgiving Servant

'For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything." And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow-slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, "Pay what you owe." Then his fellow-slave fell down and pleaded with him, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you." But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he should pay the debt. When his fellow-slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. Then his lord summoned him and said to him, "You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow-slave, as I had mercy on you?" And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he should pay his entire debt. So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.'

Message

Throughout the world, and at every level, there is need for forgiveness: the need to forgive, and the need to be forgiven. Needs on a personal basis, a national basis, and a worldwide basis.

Look back at our recent history, and our personal experience, and we see so many examples of wrong and injustice.

A man killed and seven others injured in a stabbing in Birmingham last Sunday. On Monday, In Suffolk, a 15-year old boy shot another 15-year old boy. In June, in Glasgow, a man was shot dead by police after stabbing six people, including a police officer, at a hotel housing asylum-seekers.

Back in 2017 an Islamist suicide bomber killed 22 people and injured another 120 at a concert in Manchester.

Friday, 11th September, was the 19th anniversary of what has come to be known simply as "9/11", the suicide attacks by al-Qaeda on the United States in 2001. Nearly 3000 people died. Many more have died since as result of action in retaliation.

We could talk about journalists beheaded, airliners destroyed, massacres, ethnic cleansing in many parts of the world. We could recall the Holocaust, and countless examples of war and genocide throughout history. There is much to forgive.

After protesters in Bristol pulled down the statue of slave trader Edward Colston, there have been demands across the UK for removal of statues and symbols linked with slavery. Thousands of people have taken part in anti-racism demonstrations, not only in USA, but in Glasgow, London, Coventry and Newcastle, and many other places. Irrespective of our views on demonstrations, it is obvious that the need for forgiveness works both ways.

In comparison to such huge tragedies, our personal griefs and troubles may seem trivial, yet, in our own personal lives, we all have much to forgive. There are people who have harmed us, hurt us, upset us, told lies about us – all manner of things – to a greater or lesser degree. I'm sure you can think of examples. I certainly can. And – maybe we did these things to others. Maybe even without knowing it.

In every congregations there are people who know that they should forgive, even wish they could get rid of long-held hurts and grievances, but can't. Maybe being cheated on by a spouse or partner, or being swindled in business, has left them angry – ashamed – defeated – defective – not good enough; and being told that they really ought to forgive may make it worse, because it makes them feel guilty as well. There are also people who find it hard to accept forgiveness, and they go through life burdened with guilt.

How do you forgive? Is it possible to forgive people who have hurt you very badly? Can you accept forgiveness from another person, and from God? Is it possible to forgive the people who carried out the 9/11 attacks, and all the others? Is it possible to forgive Hitler?

Some people would argue that there must be a limit beyond which forgiveness is not possible. Yet from time to time we see reports on TV of people who forgive those who have done them grievous wrong. There are outstanding examples of people who have managed to forgive in circumstances that most of us – thank God – can only imagine, and hope we will never experience.

During an open-air Remembrance Sunday in Enniskillen in November 1987 twelve worshippers were killed by an IRA bomb. That evening, in a TV interview, Gordon Wilson described the final words of his daughter as she died, holding his hand, at the scene. Instead of calling for revenge, this devout Christian simply said:

"I bear no ill will. I bear no grudge. Dirty sort of talk is not going to bring her back to lifeShe's dead. She's in heaven and we shall meet again. I will pray for these men tonight and every night."

These words of forgiveness were later identified as a major turning point in the history of the troubles in N. Ireland.

Many of us knew the late Brian Aim, from Holm. His daughter, Karen was only 26 when she was murdered in New Zealand in January 2008. Some time later, speaking of the 14-year old murderer in an interview in a national newspaper, Brian, was able to say:

"We said at the very start that we would forgive him and his family. We have our lives to live. We either forgive and carry on with our lives or if you don't forgive, I think that you are going to go down a spiral of hatred and revenge ...that is going to destroy our own lives."

The perpetrator has just been refused parole until at least 2022.

As a Prisoner of War in Japan in WW2, Eric Lomax was treated with unspeakable cruelty, yet almost 50 years later he tracked down the man responsible, befriended him and forgave him.

In the light of these things our own injuries may seem small.

Forgiveness is very, very powerful. But it is easier to admire than to copy. The Pharisees liked to receive it, but they didn't know how to give it. Their creed was "eye for eye, and tooth for tooth."

How do you feel? Could you have spoken the same words as Brian Aim, or Gordon Wilson, or Eric Lomax? Could I?? I don't know.

Would you have released Abdel Baset al-Megrahi who, rightly or wrongly, was convicted of the destruction of Pan Am Flight 103 over Lockerbie in 1988, in which 270 people died?

We often hear prominent people in USA crying out for “justice” and demanding the death penalty. Do they mean justice, or do they really mean revenge? I don’t know the answers to these questions. But I think that they are all questions that we have to ask ourselves.

Why?

Because there is the other side of the coin. We may have a lot to forgive, and we may find it very hard to do it, but we also stand seriously in the need of forgiveness. All of us have hurts, and regrets, about things we should not have done, or things we should have done and did not do. Maybe we take the promise of forgiveness for granted. Maybe we think that, in comparison with those who have injured us, in comparison with the people who carried out all those atrocities, our sins are pretty trivial – easy to forgive.

That’s not the point. The point is that our forgiveness is not unconditional! We have to do something in return:

Forgive us our debts – as we forgive our debtors!

Or: Lord, to the degree that I forgive people who sin against me, that’s the extent to which I know you will forgive me.

Remember too that this is a daily prayer! We have to forgive our debtors each time we pray!

Jesus’s parable brings this home to us very clearly. The first servant owed the King millions of pounds. Comparisons of the sums of money that Jesus mentioned, based on the daily wage of a labourer, suggest that the first servant owed 150,000 years wages – an incredible, astronomical sum, and we wonder how he managed to incur such a debt – but that’s not the point. By comparison the second servant owed 100 days wages – a tiny fraction.

Maybe we think that Jesus was deliberately exaggerating. No: Jesus is talking about forgiveness in general. What Jesus is saying is that nothing that we have to forgive can ever faintly or remotely compare with what we have been forgiven. Nothing that others can do to us can in any way compare with what we have done to God. And if God has forgiven the debt we owe to him, we must forgive our neighbours the debts they owe to us.

Matthew tells us:

‘In anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he should pay his entire debt.’

And Jesus concluded,

“So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart”.

That certainly seems to suggest that if I do not forgive those who injure me, God will withhold his forgiveness from me.

Note here in passing that *Forgiveness* and *Reconciliation* are not the same thing. Forgiveness does not necessarily lead to Reconciliation. It needs only one person - with the help of God - to forgive. It takes two – or more - to reconcile. The harm that has been caused may take a long time to heal, and it may take years to rebuild respect and trust and restore the relationship. We may explore this in more detail another time.

Today’s parable makes clear that the forgiveness of God is not about justice: it is about mercy. The first servant doesn’t understand that. He is not able to show the mercy that he has been shown. Forgiveness is not about justice, or the law. Forgiveness is a matter of the heart.

We have been forgiven a debt which is beyond all paying. Human sin brought about the death of God's own Son – and if this is so, we must forgive others as God has forgiven us, or we can hope to find no mercy.

How does this parable help people who have been badly hurt, or damaged? Or people who feel ashamed, or guilty, or undervalued?

It shows the incredible kindness of the God who gives people not the justice they deserve but the mercy they need.

It invites us to look at ourselves as forgiven debtors, living with, and living among, fellow-debtors. Forgiving, and forgiven.

To be forgiven people means to stop thinking about innocent versus guilty, or whether we are better, or worse, than anybody else, and to join a fellowship of forgiven sinners.

*Make me a channel of your peace.
It is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
in giving of ourselves that we receive;
and in dying that we're born to eternal life.*

Nearly two thousand years ago an innocent man suffered the excruciating torture of death by crucifixion at the hands of the Romans. He was just one among the thousands executed by the occupying forces.

As they nailed him to the cross he said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing".

Jesus told us that we must forgive our brother or sister from our hearts. With his help we can do it. With his help we can work towards reconciliation.

Amen. Soli Deo Gloria

(Offering) Hymn (4) 554 Rock of Ages

Dedication of Offering

Loving God,
we dedicate our offerings in hope:
hoping that you can use all our gifts for your purposes;
hoping that they, and we, may help further your kingdom,
and hoping that your kingdom will come.
May your kingdom come, and your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven. Amen.

Prayers of Intercession

Loving God,
As we bring our prayers for other people, we think of the overwhelming needs in the world around us.

The Covid Pandemic that has affected so many people comes on top of storm, flood, fires, famine, explosion; it complicates the ever-present problems of war and terrorism; it adds to the human misery of refugees and people driven from their homes and their countries.

We pray for people affected in any way by Coronavirus, and by other diseases;
for those seriously ill, and for all who tend them.

We pray for those who have lost loved ones;
for those injured in body or mind or spirit,
people who have lost everything they had,
homes, possessions, means of earning a living.
Strengthen and inspire all who try to bring help.

Loving God, graciously hear our prayers

Loving God,
We pray for the world and for all its people.
We pray for the worldwide church in all its diversity.
We think of situations where this diversity has resulted in argument and broken relationships.
Help us all to heal misunderstandings, and to encourage mutual respect,
that your loving grace may be more fully revealed.
At a time when our churches are closed or reduced in their outreach,
guide all those who seek new ways of ministering to your people,
and help us all to keep the faith.

Loving God, graciously hear our prayers

Forgiving God,
we pray for the nations of the world in all their variety.
Guide and direct governments and those in authority that they may work together
to manage the problems of disease and suffering throughout the world.
We pray for those places where variety is a source of friction and violence.
Forgive us our intolerance of those who differ from us,
and bless those actions that foster peace and reconciliation,
that your saving grace may be more fully revealed in all the world.

Loving God, graciously hear our prayers

Steadfast and compassionate God,
we pray for the community in which we live,
and for the resources we share and hold in common.
Help us all to work together to avoid the spread of disease to ourselves and to others.

We pray for homes and work places
where trust has broken down and unkindness holds sway.
We bring before you all who suffer in any way,
and especially those who endure embittered relationships and lack of forgiveness.

We hold before you those in our own hearts who are in any sort of pain...

Pause ...

All those ill at home or in hospital or hospice ...
those who bear the pain of grief and loss ...

Pause ...

Bring care and wholeness to all who suffer,
that your healing grace may be more fully revealed.

Loving God, graciously hear our prayers

Everlasting God,
as in thanksgiving we hold before you all those we have loved and see no more,
we pray for those who are coming to the end of their earthly lives,
and especially those who lack love and forgiveness as they approach death.
May we all come to know more fully the mercy and grace of your eternal kingdom.

We offer all these prayers in the name of your Son, Jesus Christ,
whose example of loving kindness and forgiveness we seek to follow. Amen.

Closing Hymn (5): 522 The church is wherever God's people are praising

Closing Words and Benediction

God calls us to be generous, merciful and forgiving,
and blesses us with grace and truth and courage:
so go in the name of Christ, thankfully, faithfully and joyfully.
May you stay safe in his ways,
and may the Blessing of God almighty, Father, Son, Holy Spirit,
be with you, and remain with you and those whom you love, today 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.