

ORPHIR and STENNESS CHURCH
Handout for Sunday 13th. December, 2020, Advent 3B

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 again the story of John the Baptist, this time as Luke tells it.

First, let us be still and quiet for a few moments.

We remind ourselves that, wherever we are, we are in the presence of the living God. We lay aside our worries and concerns and open ourselves to his word. Amen.

Call to worship

Restore our fortunes, O Lord ...

May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy.

Those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing,
shall come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves.

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): 303 It came upon the midnight clear

Opening Prayer (*based on a prayer by Christian Aid*) **and Lord's Prayer**

Even if we cannot gather in person

Emmanuel, God with us

Even if some Christmas traditions have had to go

Emmanuel, God with us

Even if we might not get to hug family and friends

Emmanuel, God with us

Even if we cannot sing carols beside each other

Emmanuel, God with us

Even if Christmas cheer is harder this year

Emmanuel, God with us

Lord Jesus,

You came, and come, to all.

You came, and come

especially to the poorest and the most vulnerable.

Come to us here, Lord Jesus,

to help and to heal the poverty of our souls;

to refresh and inspire us, even through the weakness of our faith.

Come, to love us and to hold us;

to give us the courage always to point to you,

for your name's sake.

Pause; silence

In the stopping, in the pausing, in the quiet,
we cannot avoid what we are not.

Our faults, our lack of faith, our lack of vision, and of action,
our lack of trust in you –
all bubble to the surface.

Father God,
you see what we are, and still stand by us,
offering us hope, and above all, forgiveness.

Help us here - help us now –
to recognise that it was with us in mind
that you sent the baby Jesus.
It was with us in mind
that he grew to live and die, and to rise again,
because that's what you think we are worth.
May your love set us free this day and always.

All these things we ask in the name of that Son,
whose praise we sing,
and who taught us, when we pray, to say together:
*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): 285 The Angel Gabriel

Readings:

Isaiah 61: 1-4, 8-11 (NRSVA): *The Good News of Deliverance*

The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me;
he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken-hearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners;
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour, and the day of vengeance of our God;
to comfort all who mourn; to provide for those who mourn in Zion—
to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning,
the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.
They will be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, to display his glory.
They shall build up the ancient ruins, they shall raise up the former devastations;
they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations.

(from Verse 8):

For I the Lord love justice, I hate robbery and wrongdoing;
I will faithfully give them their recompense,
and I will make an everlasting covenant with them.
Their descendants shall be known among the nations,
and their offspring among the peoples;
all who see them shall acknowledge that they are a people whom the Lord has blessed.
I will greatly rejoice in the Lord,
my whole being shall exult in my God;
for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation,

he has covered me with the robe of righteousness,
as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland,
and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.
For as the earth brings forth its shoots,
and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up,
so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise
to spring up before all the nations.

1 Thessalonians 5:16-24: (NCV):

Always be joyful. Pray continually, and give thanks whatever happens. That is what God wants for you in Christ Jesus.

Do not hold back the work of the Holy Spirit. Do not treat prophecy as if it were unimportant. But test everything. Keep what is good, and stay away from everything that is evil.

Now may God himself, the God of peace, make you pure, belonging only to him. May your whole self—spirit, soul, and body—be kept safe and without fault when our Lord Jesus Christ comes. You can trust the One who calls you to do that for you.

Hymn (3): 472 Come, thou long-expected Jesus

Gospel Reading: John 1:6-8, and 19-28 (NRSVA)

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

From V.19: The Testimony of John the Baptist:

This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, 'Who are you?' He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, 'I am not the Messiah.' And they asked him, 'What then? Are you Elijah?' He said, 'I am not.' 'Are you the prophet?' He answered, 'No.' Then they said to him, 'Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?' He said, 'I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, "Make straight the way of the Lord"', as the prophet Isaiah said.

Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. They asked him, 'Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?' John answered them, 'I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal.' This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing.

Message

On this, the third Sunday in Advent, we continue our journey towards Christmas. Last week I spoke – wrote – about Advent, and how it is a time of expectation, and waiting, and looking forward. I mentioned the desert, the wilderness, people crying out to God. and how, in our present circumstances, in the midst of the Pandemic, we might say that we too are in the wilderness. With the approval of a vaccine, there does seem to be a glimmer of light at the end of the proverbial tunnel, but there is a long way to go before the Pandemic is under control. Clearly this awful disease has had, and is still having, serious effects not only on the physical health, but also on the mental health of people of all ages and places. Last Sunday, we read Mark's account of John the Baptist. Mark introduced us to that strange, hairy man, striding out of the desert, shouting about repentance, about turning away from our sins, and being baptised, and about the Holy Spirit. As Christians, we hold on to the hope that 'Even though [we] walk through the darkest valley', God is with us. We do need something to hang on to that will reassure us and give us comfort, and strength, and some

security. Something to help ourselves – and other people - to find reassurance, and peace, and joy. John the Baptist comes to point out the way.

Today we read John's version of the story. In John's Gospel, John is simply John: no 'the Baptist' at the end of his name. This is deliberate. The writer wants to make it abundantly clear that John's principal role is not to stand in the river Jordan baptising people. His primary function is to witness to Jesus. That's why, in this Gospel, we don't read of John baptising Jesus. Nor is John the light. We are told that John was sent from God, but that *'He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light'*. John himself is at pains to tell the priests and Levites, and to tell, us who he is *not*: not the Messiah; not Elijah; not a prophet.

John knows exactly what he is, and what he is not. He is part of the unfolding plan of God, the narrator who sets the scene and tells us what is to come. He knows his limitations: "*I baptize with water*", he says, "*Among you stands one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal.*" We may imagine John's suppressed excitement as he scans the crowd, waiting for a face that only he will recognise. He doesn't mind that his work will be eclipsed. He knows that the prophets foretold his coming, and that they longed to see what he is about to see.

Maybe the religious leaders were genuinely hoping that John really was the Messiah, and were disappointed by his denial. It seems they were looking for the wrong qualities, a different kind of Messiah. Advent is a time to ask ourselves what we are looking for in Jesus, how we relate to him, and whether we can follow John's example in pointing to the Light that dispels every darkness – especially at Christmas in a year that has dimmed the lives of so many people.

In his preaching, John calls on the witness of the prophets to what God has been preparing for so long. Today's reading from Isaiah is full of joy. John would have recognised and identified with that joy, the joy of someone who is bringing good news to others.

As Christians we tend to apply Isaiah's words to the coming Christ child. It is Christ who comes to set us free, and to heal us, and help us; to carry us, and to bring us comfort and joy. Understood in that way, Isaiah's words certainly bring encouragement at a time when we really need to hear the hope and the promise that is at the heart of Christmas.

Isaiah tells us about God's amazing longing to heal the broken human condition, but he also challenges God's people to be not only recipients of the reconciling love that sent Jesus among us, but to be the bearers of that love to other people in our time and place. Isaiah is asking:

What is it we are doing to work with God to bring about healing and justice? What are we saying in God's name that helps to raise up the downtrodden?

How are we working to bring peace? To set prisoners free?

Are we really opening our hearts and reaching out to people who are having a bad time?

In 'ordinary' years, maybe we are tempted to become involved with Christmas trees, with Christmas cards, with shopping for gifts, and food and drink, with wrapping and posting, and all the preparations for Christmas, to the extent that we are in danger of losing sight of what it is all about. In this year, when shopping could be more problematic than usual, could this be a time for rejoicing in what we already have, rather than what we hope to get? Could that remind us that, as we give thanks, and as we count our blessings, we have the privilege, and the responsibility, of sharing God's goodness with people who have so much less?

The Advent story, the Good News of the coming of Christ, reminds us that there is far more to life than all those things that many people are tempted to hold on to. Maybe the present restrictions prompt us to remember that human relationships are among the most valuable gifts that we can receive: the gift of family relationships and friendships, but more especially the gift of being loved into relationship with God in Christ.

Among all the Christmas lights, can we remember the Light that shines in the darkness, and has never been put out by the darkness? Can we find the light that comes from spending time with God, the light that will help us to find renewed meaning and purpose in our lives? In these unparalleled times, times that are so dark for many people in our own communities, and in our own country, and in the wider world, can we find ways to spread that light? Can we play our part by letting our light shine before other people and lighting up the whole world?

One thing is clear from the scripture passages for today: we are not passengers when it comes to God's mission in the world. Christ came for us, to work with us and through us.

How do we plan to share in the vision that God has for our community, our nation and our world – knowing, of course, that God goes before and behind us, and is above us too...?

*You are before me, Lord, you are behind,
and over me you have spread out Your hand;*

such knowledge is too wonderful for me,

too high to grasp, too great to understand. (Hy 96, from Psalm 139) [1193]

Questions to ask as we look towards Christmas.

Amen. Soli Deo Gloria.

(Offering) Hymn (4) Hymn 96 You are before me, Lord, you are behind

Dedication of offering:

Gracious God,

as we bring to you our offering,

help us to accept the reality

of proclaiming the Good News in word and deed today,

always remembering that,

without gifts shared, talents used, and time made available,

Christ's work cannot be done. Amen.

Prayers of Intercession

Creator God,

we thank you, for your Son, the Light of the world,

and we thank you for those in every generation

who have faithfully pointed to him,

and who have spread his light, even in darkest times.

Lord Jesus,

May we find the courage to point to

the hope and comfort and peace that you offer,

especially in times of difficulty and sorrow.

May we bear witness to your love and your goodness,

your presence and your compassion.

We bring our thanks for the family of your people

meeting this day here and throughout the world,

all of us conscious of our faults and our limitations,

but knowing too, that you, Lord Jesus,

can take the tiniest spark and fan it into a raging fire.

Give us the courage and the desire

to seek to serve you as best we can,

and in that service may we reflect the life you lived.

We offer you our prayers for those who struggle with this season.

We pray for the bereaved,

for those who cannot afford to celebrate as they might wish,
for those with no one to share a table,
and for those for whom childlessness is the more acute at this time.

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

Pause

Lord God,
you understand and share
tears and silences, disappointments and regrets.
Bring your comfort,
fill all with your strength,
and grant them your peace...

We pray also for places in the world
where conflict and violence are rife;
for places where nature has been harsh,
and where we have been thoughtless
in caring for your creation:
Give us greater concern for one another,
and increase our willingness to do whatever we can
for each other and for the world.

So may we work with you, Lord God,
to make of this world the world you intended it to be:
a world where people care, and love, and laugh,
a world where justice reigns, and peace is evident,
and where all know that they belong.

In thanksgiving for all your gifts,
and, above all, for the gift of your Son,
we offer all our prayers,
in his name and for his sake.
Amen.

Hymn 283 The voice of God goes out to all the world

Closing Words and Benediction

We have been nurtured by the Spirit of Life.
We go in the assurance that the Word of God lasts for ever, and his promises are true.
Let us go in the blessed joy of God's kindness.
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.