

**ORPHIR and STENNESS CHURCH**  
**Handout for Sunday 14<sup>th</sup>. June, 2020: Proper 6A**

**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.

In today's reading, Matthew gives an overview of Jesus' ministry – teaching, proclaiming the gospel and healing people. Then Jesus gives his disciples the commission and authority to replicate and extend this ministry more widely.

**Gathering Words and Prayer**

*Let us pause for a moment and know the presence of God.*

Loving Lord, your grace draws us to your presence;  
your peace unites us in your love;  
your hope inspires us to praise your glory.  
May our worship be worthy of you. 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.  
Worship God with gladness. Come into his presence and sing his praises

**Hymn (1): 124** Praise to the Lord, the Almighty, the King of creation

**Opening Prayer and Lord's Prayer**

Lord, we cannot sit at your feet as did the first disciples,  
nor follow you through the roads of Galilee.  
We cannot watch in wonder as you heal;  
we cannot ask questions and talk with you deep into the night.  
In these times of Lockdown we cannot even meet with you in our church buildings.

Yet we know Lord, that we are your disciples today.  
We would serve you and speak to you, and for you.  
We come with our weaknesses and our vulnerabilities, our fears and apprehensions,  
in our faith and in our doubts.

In our own places and our own times we come to you, the king of love –  
in the name of your Son, and in the power of your Spirit,  
asking that you will meet us today and touch our hearts  
with your generosity, your compassion, your wisdom,  
praying that you will transform our lives,  
and speak through us, pray through us, and heal through us,  
as we walk the way of the first disciples.

Lord, you have called us to the privilege of service,  
but we acknowledge that often we have failed to serve.  
You have given us the blessing of peace, but we have chosen discord.  
You have loved us as a shepherd tends his sheep,  
but we have strayed from your way.

Trusting in your pardoning love, we ask that you will lead us again into the path of obedience and faithfulness that your Son Jesus trod.

We give you thanks, loving God, that when we can't find the right words, you transform our stumbling;  
when we can find only harsh words, you transform our pain;  
when we can find no words at all, you transform our silence, as the Spirit speaks on our behalf.  
When we would speak your words, you transform our longing, and speak through us your life-giving words of healing, acceptance and grace.

In our separate places we unite with the whole world in praising you, creator God.  
Coming before you with gladness and thanksgiving  
we praise your goodness;  
we praise your faithfulness;  
we praise your tenderness.  
We are yours and we worship you.

We bless your name for ever, as we sum up our prayers in the words Jesus taught us:  
*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): 501** Take this moment, sign and space

**Psalm 100:**

Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth.  
Worship the Lord with gladness;  
come into his presence with singing.

Know that the Lord is God.  
It is he that made us, and we are his;  
we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.

Enter his gates with thanksgiving,  
and his courts with praise.  
Give thanks to him, bless his name.

For the Lord is good;  
his steadfast love endures for ever,  
and his faithfulness to all generations.

**Romans 5:1-8** New Revised Standard Version, Anglicised (NRSVA)

*Results of Justification*

Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person someone might actually

dare to die. But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.

**Hymn (3): 544** When I needed a neighbour, were you there, were you there?

**Gospel Reading:** Matthew 9:35-10:23: (NRSVA)

*The Harvest Is Great, the Labourers Few*

Then Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, 'The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest.

Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. You received without payment; give without payment. Take no gold, or silver, or copper in your belts, no bag for your journey, or two tunics, or sandals, or a staff; for labourers deserve their food. Whatever town or village you enter, find out who in it is worthy, and stay there until you leave. As you enter the house, greet it. If the house is worthy, let your peace come upon it; but if it is not worthy, let your peace return to you. If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet as you leave that house or town. Truly I tell you, it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgement than for that town.

*Coming Persecutions*

'See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. Beware of them, for they will hand you over to councils and flog you in their synagogues; and you will be dragged before governors and kings because of me, as a testimony to them and the Gentiles. When they hand you over, do not worry about how you are to speak or what you are to say; for what you are to say will be given to you at that time; for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you. Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death; and you will be hated by all because of my name. But the one who endures to the end will be saved. When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next; for truly I tell you, you will not have gone through all the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes.

**Message: Twelve.**

Throughout the ages, people have attached special significance to certain numbers. Twelve is one of these. Google tells me that the number 12 appears 187 times in the Bible, where it is said to be a symbol of faith, the church, and divine rule.

The book of Genesis tells us that the 12 sons of Jacob formed the 12 tribes of Israel. The New Testament tells us that Jesus was 12 years old when he questioned the scholars in the temple, and that he had 12 apostles. According to the Book of Revelation, the kingdom of God has 12 gates guarded by 12 angels. The number 12 occurs in many places, such as the 12 months of the year and the 12 constellations of the zodiac. People have attached meaning to fractions of twelve and multiples of twelve. Until recently we bought things in twelves – in *dozens*. Maybe we still do. Today we are having a look at one particular group of twelve: the twelve apostles, but I was reminded recently of another twelve – another dozen.

Television programmes seem to make the most of some older films, and show them repeatedly. Maybe you remember one that keeps coming up: *The Dirty Dozen*, a WW2 war film made in 1967, starring Lee Marvin. I have seen it a couple of times, and didn't feel the need to see it again. Briefly, the film, said to be based on a true story, tells the story of a special military operation intended to kill high-ranking Nazi officers in a very risky mission

likely to result in the death of the participants. The point for us is that the unorthodox American major in charge, ordered to select twelve a twelve-man squad for the mission, selects not the best soldiers in his outfit, but instead a bunch of thieves, murderers, and scoundrels from the military prisons. Needless to say, the criminal skills of the "dirty dozen" prove perfect for the purpose, and the highly unlikely, rag-tag band of brothers get the job done.

Of course, we couldn't condone the behaviour of criminals, but the film presents an interesting plot about a dozen men whom the world did not regard with honour, and who seemed ill-suited for a critically important task, but who, in the right situation, with a unique sort of guidance, became heroes in the midst of an assignment that demanded an unconventional solution.

This takes us to another unconventional leader who, in an even more extraordinary era, called together his own very ordinary dozen men to take on the most momentous mission of all time. Today's Gospel reading is not about a "dirty" dozen, but about an equally unique and unorthodox dozen.

When Jesus chose his twelve, he wasn't looking for any special list of qualifications. He didn't seem to care whether they had unusual spiritual insight or proven ability. He looked for not the best, or the brightest, but the ordinary. He selected a group of mostly undistinguished and untested commoners, some of whom seemed failures by the standards of today's world. One at least was young and inexperienced. Some were unexceptional fishermen. Most had grown up in the rocky upland region of Galilee. One was a fanatical Jewish Nationalist. Matthew was a despised tax collector. Several argued among themselves about who was the greatest disciple. When it came to the crunch, Peter denied even knowing Jesus. And then there was Judas – the betrayer.

We can't help concluding that, for his dozen, Jesus wanted people who were not special. He chose twelve ordinary men with no particular qualifications for transforming the world, and yet he trusted them to spread the news of the kingdom of God. He sent them out to do the very work that he had been doing himself, and to continue doing it after he was gone. Jesus sent his twelve out on a mission that was at least as risky as that of the 'dirty dozen' of the film, a mission he described as going out 'like sheep into the midst of wolves.' (Matt. 10:16)

He warned them that they were likely to be flogged and "dragged before governors and kings" as a result of accepting his call to mission. In the most frightening of his warnings to his dozen, he suggested that they faced circumstances in which "*brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death,*" and that they would be hated by all for following Jesus. (Matt. 10:21)

I think Jesus knew better than to invite experienced leaders or outstanding examples. What he needed was down-to-earth, ordinary, vulnerable people – a kind of dozen who were representative of the general population and understood their pain and their fears. And, when you think about it, who else would have had the courage, or the naivete – who else would have been daft enough - to join such a band of brothers on such a dangerous mission?

OK: what does it all mean for us in Orkney and in the world today? The important lesson for us as Christians in 2020 is that we represent that first "dozen" charged with carrying on the work of Jesus. It may be – I hope – that the problems and dangers we face are unlikely to be as dramatic as those that the original apostles faced, but, nevertheless, remaining faithful in following Jesus in today's world is no easy job. Yet there is still hope for us if we can follow the example of those ordinary apostles.

In most small or average-sized congregations, carrying out the work Jesus commissioned us to do begins with groups of ordinary members who may not believe they have any

superlative qualifications, just like Jesus's first dozen, but who, like the apostles, can rise to the occasion to meet the needs of other people, whoever or whatever they may be. Ordinariness is not a hindrance - unless we choose to make it a hindrance.

Among Jesus's dozen, who seemed really suited to the job of carrying on God's work? And among us, and among people like us, who is really qualified to proclaim the Gospel to an unbelieving and uncaring world, and to share God's love in action among those around us? Who, in any generation, is qualified to heal a broken world in the name of Jesus? Very few, we might think. Yet, like the fictitious dirty dozen of the film, and like Jesus's original dozen, we *can* find the courage and the wherewithal to accept the command to follow Jesus into ministry for this generation. We can, because he promised to help us.

At this time of the Coronavirus pandemic we might ask ourselves whether, if we had known about it in advance, any of us could have felt qualified to face the unprecedented challenge of a hitherto unknown disease that would take so many lives, and how we might cope with the Lockdown, and all the disruption of work and travel, and so many things that we take for granted; how we would cope with physical separation from family and friends, and from the Church, the body of Christ. Yet throughout the country, in parishes and communities 'unqualified' and 'untrained' people have risen to the challenge, supporting the professionals where possible, and maintaining loving, caring contact through telephones and technology. Ministers and leaders of closed church buildings are sending out services and other material through the internet - indeed it is a small consolation during the Lockdown that we can sit in our own homes and join in two, or even three Sunday services, from Orkney and beyond, in the time we might normally spend in attending our own church service.

Maybe we should have expected a response like this, because, throughout Christian history, those dozen apostles have been replaced by a never-ending series of other groups who continued to carry out the never-ending instructions of Jesus to go out - or reach out - to other people as his agents of love. Every one of us is empowered to do so, not because of our own abilities or readiness, but through the power of the Holy Spirit.

The officer in the World War II film, and Jesus in the first century, had one thing in common; they saw in their 'dozen' a potential that these people could not see in themselves. The church recognizes this in baptism. We believe that in our baptism we receive the Holy Spirit, and we are commissioned to be disciples in the same way as Jesus's first dozen.

It has been said that God does not want extraordinary people to do extraordinary things nearly as much as he wants ordinary people who do ordinary things - but do them extraordinarily well. It seems that God takes the view that what needs to be done in the world requires ordinary people to do it; ordinary people, like most of us. His work calls for the capabilities and experience we gain from work, or school, or leisure activities, or bringing up a family, or doing whatever is normal for us. All of these things we can use to help others. God needs today's 'dozen' - dozens - to use a great variety of gifts and skills and experiences to carry out a task no less daunting than that portrayed in the film: the continuing business of proclaiming the good news to those who do not know God, and for carrying out the commands of the Gospel by loving our neighbours as ourselves, by providing for those in need, by doing our peedie bit to help bring about justice and peace.

Jesus delighted in taking ordinary, everyday people, people who didn't seem to possess great qualifications or credentials, and calling them to become his disciples. He does the same for us. The Holy Spirit, the Advocate, the Helper, makes available to us all that we need to be successful as we remain faithful to Jesus and his mission - and to our own commission. Jesus sends us out into the world to proclaim a word of salvation to a world that badly needs it: to help heal a broken people: to be Jesus's 'dirty dozen' for this generation.

Amen. SDG.

**(Offering) Hymn (4) 533** Will you come and follow me

**Dedication of Offering**

Loving God, Creator of all things, everything on earth is yours.  
We have nothing that can make you richer,  
for all that we have comes from you in the first place.  
We bring our acknowledgement that we live thanks to you,  
and that, without you, we have nothing and can do nothing.  
Receive and bless our gifts for your holy work,  
and bless also those who offer them to you. Amen.

**Prayers of Intercession**

*Let us pray:*

Loving God,  
We give thanks that, as you call us to serve you,  
you strengthen and equip us for the job.

We pray that you will watch over those who risk their own safety by caring for others.  
As the Covid-19 pandemic extends throughout our country and our world,  
we pray for all who are at the forefront of the battle  
to heal those affected and limit the spread of the disease.  
Be very close to doctors and nurses and health professionals;  
strengthen those who assist loved ones at home,  
and enfold in your loving care all who have lost loved ones.

Guide and support all who work to produce medicines and vaccines,  
all who have to decide on planning and policy,  
that the pandemic may be brought to an end.

**Lord, hear us.**

***Lord, graciously hear us.***

We pray for people who risk their safety and their lives for the sake of your Gospel.  
Support and protect all those who are in danger today,  
especially those preaching the gospel in a hostile environment.

Loving Lord, you understand what it means to suffer for what is right.  
Give comfort and courage to those who are unjustly imprisoned, intimidated and tortured  
because of their faith.

O Lord, you taught us to pray for those who abuse us and hurt us.  
We pray for people who persecute those who hold different beliefs from their own;  
may they be touched by faith and their hearts be opened to love,  
that the world may be united in your love.

**Lord, hear us.**

***Lord, graciously hear us.***

Compassionate God,  
hear our prayers for those who feel like sheep among wolves  
in their place of work, or in their own communities.

As we watch in sadness and in outrage  
rioting provoked by discrimination against minority groups,  
we pray for those who are vulnerable,  
those who are bullied, those intimidated by their neighbours,  
or by their peers, or by those in authority over them.

Loving Lord,  
you empower us to live out our discipleship.  
Give wisdom, imagination and the strength to persevere  
to those who face apathy as they seek to live out their calling.

At this time we bring to you people for whom we have special concerns.

*Pause*

**Lord, hear us.**  
***Lord, graciously hear us.***

O Lord, strengthen us all, we pray,  
that in whatever difficulties may lie ahead, for us and for those we love,  
we may keep the faith,  
and that we may be your voice and your hands in our own circumstances.

All our prayers we ask in Jesus' name. Amen

**Closing Hymn(5) 182** Now thank we all our God

### **Closing Words and Benediction**

In your journeying be adventurous.  
In your encounters be kind.  
In your heart be at peace.  
May God bless you as you take risks,  
and reward you as you make a difference.  
And may the blessing of God almighty, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit,  
be with us all, and remain with us, 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.