

ORPHIR and STENNESS CHURCH
Service Handout for Sunday 17.05.20; Easter 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.

Today we find Jesus talking with his disciples before he leaves them; trying to say goodbye and letting them know that they will not be alone or abandoned. He has asked God to send a Spirit, an Advocate, to be our companion. In keeping the commandment to love God, we will be connected to God and Jesus, and never alone. It may sometimes feel hard to follow Jesus's example of love and living, but we are never alone on the journey.

Let us pause for a moment in quietness...

You are the centre, Lord, of my life. Amid all my preoccupations, all the worries and hassles and concerns in my mind right now, can I focus for a moment on the centre of my life? Can I open my heart to God, my guide, my healer, my teacher? Can I stop for a moment and listen to God's voice?

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.

Hymn (1): 132 Immortal, Invisible God only wise

Opening Prayer and Lord's Prayer

Eternal and ever-blessed God,
we thank you for the privilege and the joy of coming to you in worship.
Even when we are separated by circumstances,
when the church buildings we know are not available to us,
in our own time, and from our own spaces, we come to you,
knowing that we unite with Christian people around the world,
for the voices of praise and prayer are never silent.

We give thanks for the family of faith, united as the people of God,
united in our desire to follow Jesus.

Remembering the promise that nothing can separate us from your love,
demonstrated to us in Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh, who came and lived among us,
we turn our eyes, our hearts and our minds to you.

In these times of worry and uncertainty
we bring to you our fears for our loved ones, and for ourselves.
We pray for all those who are living in fear:
fear of illness;
fear for loved ones,
fear of other people's reactions to them.
May your Spirit bring a sense of calmness and peace.

We pray for your church in this place and throughout the world;
we pray for those we would normally meet in our congregations;
for those who will feel isolated by not being able to attend;
for those who have to make decisions affecting the lives and freedoms of others.

Loving God,
we bring to you our own needs and anxieties.
If we are ill, strengthen us.
If we are tired, fortify our spirits.

If we are anxious, help us to consider the lilies of the field and the birds of the air.

Help us not to stockpile treasures from supermarkets in the barns of our larders.
Help us not to let our own fears cause us to overlook the needs of others more vulnerable than ourselves.

Fill our minds with your peace, and our hearts with your love.

Help us always to hold fast to the good, seeing the good in others,
seeking to be your instruments in extending your love and support to others in need.

These and all our prayers we bring in the name of Jesus, 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): 444: Out of sight, the Lord has gone.

Readings:

Acts 17:22-32: *New Revised Standard Version, Anglicised (NRSVA)*

Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, 'Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, "To an unknown god."

What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us. For "In him we live and move and have our being"; as even some of your own poets have said,

"For we too are his offspring."

Since we are God's offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals. While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.'

When they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some scoffed; but others said, 'We will hear you again about this.'

1 Peter 3:13-22 (NRSVA)

Now who will harm you if you are eager to do what is good? But even if you do suffer for doing what is right, you are blessed. Do not fear what they fear, and do not be intimidated, but in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord. Always be ready to make your defence to anyone who demands from you an account of the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and reverence. Keep your conscience clear, so that, when you are maligned, those who abuse you for your good conduct in Christ may be put to shame. For it is better to suffer for doing good, if suffering should be God's will, than to suffer for doing evil. For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit, in which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison, who in former times did not obey, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight people, were saved through water. And baptism, which this prefigured, now saves you—not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers made subject to him.

Hymn (3): 594 Come, Holy Spirit, Come

Gospel Reading: John 14:15-21 (NRSVA); *The Promise of the Holy Spirit*

'If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you for ever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.

I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them.'

Message:

At this very worrying and puzzling time, many of us are struggling with opinions and instructions from government and others.

In time past, in difficulty, people might ask themselves, "*What would Jesus do?*" "If only we had been there when Jesus was around!" they might say – "It would have been so much easier. He would have explained everything, encouraged us, told us what to do. He would have given us so much encouragement."

Nice idea, but it's wrong.

This is not the picture we find in the gospels, and it's not the picture we get from Peter and from Paul in our readings. The people who were around in Jesus's day found it harder, not easier. They didn't understand Jesus, or his radical, even outrageous, ideas. Some, even his own family, thought he was mad. One of his closest followers betrayed him, and when he was arrested, they all ran away. His closest friend denied him.

All that was still to come. The disciples were having a worrying and puzzling time too. They didn't know it yet, but their world was about to collapse in chaos around them, and our Gospel reading shows us Jesus trying to reassure them. He had told them repeatedly that he will be leaving them - and with a very difficult job to do - but they have not understood. Here again he assures them that he will not leave them to struggle on alone. He tells them:

I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you for ever.

He will send someone, the Advocate, the Helper, to guide them, and help them in what they are to do. This Helper is the Spirit who reveals the truth about God, and he will stay with them forever.

Jesus is no longer present with us in the flesh, but he promised his followers - he promises us - to send us his own spirit, his own breath, his own inner life. To send an Advocate, a Helper. At the present time, in the Coronavirus lockdown, we certainly need a helper.

The Greek word that the NRSV translates as "advocate" has a lot of meanings: comforter, or helper, or friend, counsellor, intercessor, strengthener, standby, and so on. It can also mean the advocate who pleads our case before opponents, or the person called in to help in times of need, or bereavement, or personal tragedy, to give strength to carry on.

For us, in our time, it means that in the strength of the Helper, in the spirit of Jesus himself, Christians now are in a better situation than were the followers of Jesus during his lifetime here on earth.

We believe – don't we – that we received the Holy Spirit at certain times of our lives: baptism; Holy Communion, and perhaps at other times? Do we still trust in the presence of the Spirit of God in our lives? What does it mean for us to have an advocate, counsellor, comforter, and helper in God's Spirit?

All of today's readings tell us about the nature of God, and about our relationship with him. We see Jesus turning his disciples' fear and depression into hope. Look at the astonishing relationship that Jesus promises:

"You will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you".

John tells us that this relationship is based on love. For John, love is the basis of everything. God loves Jesus: Jesus loves God: God loves us: Jesus loves us: we love God through Jesus, and we are commanded to love each other. Heaven and earth, and men and women, are all bound together in love.

The poet Tennyson wrote:

" .. the whole round earth is every way Bound by gold chains about the feet of God."

Notice, too, how John stresses the need for obedience as the proof of love.

"They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me."

Love of God and obedience to God are linked.

St. John's Gospel is as immediate and accessible, or as deep, as you wish it to be. Somebody said it is "a stream in which children can wade and elephants swim."

Here John tells us about the nature of God, and our relationship with Him:

Jesus says (verse20):

"I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you." (NRSV)

Read that again:

I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you. (NIV)

In Acts 17: 27-28 Paul tells us:

God is not far from each one of us. For *"In him we live and move and have our being"*;

Here Paul is quoting some of the Greek philosophers – so the idea is already around. The idea of God, the encompassing Spirit all around us.

How do you envisage God? How do you think of God?

My own perception of God has changed, and it continues to change. I used to think of God as a stern old man with a long white beard sitting somewhere in the clouds like a disapproving headmaster, ready to let us have it with his Lochgelly strap if we step out of line.

Over the years I have come to find a lot of reassurance in the idea that God is present everywhere. I am reminded of the children's hymn I learned at Sunday School:

God is always near me, Hearing what I say, Knowing all my thoughts and deeds, All my work and play.

God is all around us and within us, and we are within God – and yet God is more than everything, above and beyond everything we can possibly imagine.

God all around us and within us: God the air that we breathe, the ocean in which we swim - the God in whom we live and move and have our being, as Paul says.

Look what Paul tells the Greeks about God. He says he has noticed that they are deeply religious people, but then he says that they seem to be prepared to worship almost anything, and put up altars to nothing in particular. He compliments them on the number and variety of their religious sites, the places where they worship - then tells them that they are all useless!

You are hedging your bets, he says. Trying to keep all your options open by performing as many sacrifices at as many altars as possible. You're trying to control God – to persuade God to do what you want – by all those sacrifices at all those shrines you have built.

But you can't buy God. God is not like that. God doesn't need your gifts – God is the source of all that there is to give! God made the world and everything in it. God is Lord of heaven and earth. God does not live in temples made by human hands. God does not need anything that we can supply by working for him, because it is God himself who gives life and breath and everything else to everyone.

Maybe we all hedge our bets; keep our options open. Come to church occasionally. Put a pound or two in the plate. Enough to remind God that we are still here, and we're not really all that bad. But stopping short of full commitment.

Paul reminds his listeners, and he reminds us, that there is no easy way.

The Message translation puts verses 30-31 bluntly:

"God overlooks it as long as you don't know any better—but that time is past. The unknown is now known, and he's calling for a radical life-change. He has set a day when the entire human race will be judged and everything set right. And he has already appointed the judge, confirming him before everyone by raising him from the dead."

The risen Christ is the living proof.

Paul doesn't get any further. He doesn't mention Jesus by name, but his meaning is clear. The promise of resurrection from the dead, and the threat of judgement, makes his hearers stop and think. Some find the idea of the resurrection incredible, and nobody likes this stuff about judgement. Whatever the reasons, they stop short of making that vital commitment.

Some of them make fun of him, but others say, "We want to hear you speak about this again."

What would we have done? What will we do? Are we still to be convinced?
Have we made that commitment? Is there anything more that we can do?

Peter offers some guidance:

Always be ready to make your defence to anyone who demands from you an account of the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and reverence. Keep your conscience clear, so that, when you are maligned, those who abuse you for your good conduct in Christ may be put to shame. (1 Peter 3: 15-16)

Always be ready to speak up for your faith. Are you ready at all times to speak up for your faith? Have you missed any opportunities? I have missed far too many.

For Paul, the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ are the most important events of human life for Jew and Greek, man and woman, ancient and modern. His followers needed encouragement. So do we. Paul tells us:

I am sure that what we are suffering now cannot compare with the glory that will be shown to us. (Rom.8: 18, CEV)

Through Jesus Christ we are invited to a close, intimate relationship with God. Jesus says: *I am in my Father and you are in me, just as I am in you.*

Paul adds: *"God is not far from each one of us ... in him we live and move and have our being".*

The last word: I keep coming back to another text from John's Gospel:

Jesus said:

"I have come in order that you might have life — life in all its fullness."

A unique relationship with the God in whom we live and move and have our being. Life in all its fullness. That's what is on offer.

In our time and our place, how do we respond?

Amen. SDG

(Offering) Hymn (4) 251 I the Lord of Sea and Sky

Dedication of Offering:

Living God

You have given us life and breath, and all that we have.

We have nothing to give to you except what we have received from you.

With our offerings, given, not in church today, but in other ways,
help us to dedicate to you all that we have and are,
so that you may have what is indeed your own,
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Prayers of Intercession

Let us take our weariness and tiredness to God, who picks up those who have fallen
and raises up those who are brought low.

Good Lord, we pray you,
bless those who feel bowed down under the burdens they must carry:
their responsibilities at work, especially at this time;
those making decisions for the management of the pandemic;
medical professionals risking their own lives in the service of those affected by Covid-19;
all those suffering from the disease, and all who wait and worry.
May they know the power of your Spirit to strengthen and support them.

God our Father,
especially at this time of lockdown and isolation
bless those who are lonely;
bless those who have grown old, and, with the passing years,
have lost all their friends and contemporaries.
Help us all to find ways and means to offer a listening ear, a friendly voice, a helping hand.

Let us take our sorrows to God,
who binds up the broken-hearted and comforts those who mourn.
O Lord, support all those whose hearts are sore today.
Be very close to those whose family circle has been invaded by disease and tragedy,
whose world has been darkened by death,
especially those isolated from their loved ones at the last.

We remember those who have lost loved ones for whom they have cared,
whose needs they have met,
whose lives have been so intertwined
that they still listen for a voice they will not hear again;
all those for whom familiar places, and sounds and smells
awaken memories that bring tears.

Loving God, we thank you for our faith that those who are gone from us are safe in your keeping. May
they rest in peace and rise in glory.

Let us turn to God in trust, bringing to him
all those for whom we have special concerns today.

Pause

Let us also commit ourselves again to God.

Gracious God,
send us forth this day with the joy that no-one can take from us,
in the life which is your life,
and in the hope that gives purpose and strength to our actions,
trusting in Jesus who lived among us, died for us and rose again.
In His name we pray. Amen.

Closing Hymn (5) 512 To God be the glory

Closing Words and Benediction

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing,
so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

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.