

**ORPHIR and STENNESS CHURCH**  
**Service Handout for Sunday 20<sup>th</sup>. September 2020; Proper 20A**

**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 the workers in the vineyard.  
First, let us pause for a moment and know that God is here among us.

God, you have called us to come together;  
you have called us to turn from our sin;  
you have called us to worship you.  
In your name we gather;  
to your name we offer our praise.

**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.  
Come, let us celebrate the fame of God's abundant goodness,  
and sing aloud of his righteousness.

**Hymn (1): 159** Lord, for the years

**Opening Prayer and Lord's Prayer**

With love in our hearts,  
With praise on our lips, intent on worship,  
we come to offer our time and our thoughts to God.  
We come to receive words of comfort and words of challenge.  
May God unite us now in prayer and worship  
with Christians everywhere  
that his name may be glorified.

In these worrying and confusing times  
we are unsure of where we are going.  
We don't always choose the right path,  
and we certainly don't always follow it.  
We don't always cope well with the struggles of life,  
and too often we forget to give thanks for its joys.  
Too often we are selfish and intent on our own needs,  
careless of how our choices may affect others.  
We pray for God's reassurance and renewal.

In praise and thanksgiving to God  
we think of the beauty and wonder, the diversity and richness,  
of all that he has created.  
We give thanks for the continuing comfort of his presence,  
for his steadfastness that perseveres with us

even as we falter and hesitate.

Day by day, he amazes and enriches us,  
revealing himself in new and unexpected ways,  
our God, the same yesterday, today and for ever – and yet forever new.

Above all, we give thanks for the gift of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ,  
the Word made flesh who came to dwell among us.

As we face the uncertainties of the time ahead  
we take comfort in his promise of his continuing presence with us.

May he grant us the grace to follow more nearly in his example.

In his name we ask, as in his 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): 506** All I once held dear

### **Readings:**

#### **Exodus 16:2-15 (NRSV): *Bread from Heaven***

The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. The Israelites said to them, 'If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.'

Then the Lord said to Moses, 'I am going to rain bread from heaven for you, and each day the people shall go out and gather enough for that day. In that way I will test them, whether they will follow my instruction or not. On the sixth day, when they prepare what they bring in, it will be twice as much as they gather on other days.' So Moses and Aaron said to all the Israelites, 'In the evening you shall know that it was the Lord who brought you out of the land of Egypt, and in the morning you shall see the glory of the Lord, because he has heard your complaining against the Lord. For what are we, that you complain against us?' And Moses said, 'When the Lord gives you meat to eat in the evening and your fill of bread in the morning, because the Lord has heard the complaining that you utter against him—what are we? Your complaining is not against us but against the Lord.'

Then Moses said to Aaron, 'Say to the whole congregation of the Israelites, "Draw near to the Lord, for he has heard your complaining.'" And as Aaron spoke to the whole congregation of the Israelites, they looked towards the wilderness, and the glory of the Lord appeared in the cloud. The Lord spoke to Moses and said, 'I have heard the complaining of the Israelites; say to them, "At twilight you shall eat meat, and in the morning you shall have your fill of bread; then you shall know that I am the Lord your God.'"

In the evening quails came up and covered the camp; and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. When the layer of dew lifted, there on the surface of the wilderness was a fine flaky substance, as fine as frost on the ground. When the Israelites saw it, they said to one another, 'What is it?' For they did not know what it was. Moses said to them, 'It is the bread that the Lord has given you to eat.

.....  
**Philippians 1:21-30 (NRSV): *To live is Christ.***

For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain. If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labour for me; and I do not know which I prefer. I am hard pressed between the two: my desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better; but to remain in the flesh is more necessary for you. Since I am convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with all of you for your progress and joy in faith, so that I may share abundantly in your boasting in Christ Jesus when I come to you again.

Only, live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that, whether I come and see you or am absent and hear about you, I will know that you are standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel, and are in no way intimidated by your opponents. For them this is evidence of their destruction, but of your salvation. And this is God's doing. For he has graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well— since you are having the same struggle that you saw I had and now hear that I still have

**Hymn (3): 253** Inspired by love and anger

**Gospel Reading: Matthew 20:1-16 (NRSVA); The Labourers in the Vineyard**

'For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire labourers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the labourers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. When he went out about nine o'clock, he saw others standing idle in the market-place; and he said to them, "You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right." So they went. When he went out again about noon and about three o'clock, he did the same. And about five o'clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, "Why are you standing here idle all day?" They said to him, "Because no one has hired us." He said to them, "You also go into the vineyard." When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, "Call the labourers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first." When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, saying, "These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat." But he replied to one of them, "Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?" So the last will be first, and the first will be last.'

**Message**

Matthew is the only Gospel writer to tell the story of the workers in the vineyard. It is an interesting, clear, believable story. It is also a parable, an earthly story with a heavenly meaning, as somebody said: a story that seems to be about one thing, but also has deeper and more important meanings. Parables usually have one salient point: one take-home message, that leaps out at you. Very likely the first listeners to this parable were like us – we grasp the important point, but later, at leisure, ponder on what else the story has to say.

The first obvious lesson here is about the compassion, and the extraordinary generosity and the fairness of the Owner of the vineyard – of God. All of the workers got a full day's wage. Everyone could go home and feed his or her family. Just as it was with manna, everyone got enough, no one got too much, nothing was left over.

This parable also carries *a warning, a reassurance and a challenge*, all of them as relevant for us here today as they were when Jesus spoke the words.

We can easily identify with the people in the story. The desperately poor people of Jesus's time would have understood it all too well. They lived under Roman occupation, under a "domination system" – the most common way of organising society in ancient times. The many were ruled by the few, the powerful and wealthy. The religious establishment collaborated with the Roman government to ensure that between one half and two thirds of the wealth from agricultural production went to them through taxation and exploitation. The arrangement was justified by religion, with strong-arm back up from the Romans where needed. The people were told that the rulers were appointed by God, so what the rulers said reflected the will of God. The political and economic domination of the many by the few, and the use of religious claims to justify it. Political oppression, economic exploitation, and religious endorsement. Domination systems like this still exist in parts of the world today.

The scene from Jesus's story today is familiar enough, especially in places where there is high unemployment. People waiting for work, waiting to be hired, waiting to earn a day's wage – in those days just enough to feed your family. The main concern is bread, daily bread, like the manna in the Exodus story. We are reminded of this every time we say the Lord's Prayer: "Give us this day our daily bread." The original Greek really means '*give us today bread for the coming day*'. It teaches us to live one day at a time and not to worry about a distant and unknown future.

The workers here were day-labourers. They lived a precarious existence, not like servants, who were attached to the household, and who could rely on a regular wage, however little it was, or even like slaves, who could at least be sure of their food.

Their daily wage was a denarius, a small silver coin, enough to live on, for a day, but no more. There was no margin. They had to find work every day. There are still people in that situation today, exploited by unscrupulous employers, gang-masters, and the like.

All those guys hanging around in the market-place all day were not just idling away their time. The market place was the equivalent of the Job Centre – the Labour Exchange --the feeing market.

Who would be selected first? Which workers would *you* choose? Obviously the big, strong young fellows; the experienced workers; the ones with a good reputation. Who would be last? The older; the less able; the unreliable; the work-shy, the troublemakers. What about the widow, or the single parent, who had to see to the kids before looking for work to feed them?

To be hired late in the day and get less than a day's wage meant hardship for the whole family, not to mention what it does to someone's sense of self-worth to be passed over when the hiring is being done, and the worry that gets worse as the day wears on. Maybe that's worse than working through the heat of the day.

Come 5 o'clock, there are still people waiting.  
"Why?" the Owner asks. "Because nobody has hired us."

They are still hoping. They are desperate. Even if they only work for an hour, they might at least get a meal out of it.

The grape harvest ripened at the end of September, just before the rains came. The harvest had to be completed in time, or else it was ruined. It was a race against time. Any worker was welcome. The Owner takes them on - **and then he treats them all the same**. No preferential treatment for those who were there from the start!

Notice too that he tells his foreman to pay the workers, starting with those who were hired last. Why? There can be only one reason – he wanted those hired first to know what the

latecomers had been paid. Had he started with them, they would have gone on their way, content with the expected wage, and none the wiser.

Behind the obvious meaning of the parable Jesus is giving some **warnings**, firstly another in a series of warnings to the Jews. Matthew is making sure they get the message.

Matthew was writing around 50 years after Jesus was crucified, and he was adding his own emphasis for his own special circumstances. It was a time of new beginnings and rapid development for the early Christian church. Perhaps Jesus anticipated, and Matthew experienced, a tendency for the Jewish Christians to think themselves superior to their Gentile brothers and sisters.

Here Matthew adds emphasis to the story. Matthew is the most Jewish of the gospels, and at the same time the most anti-Jewish. He assembles Jesus's teaching for a definite purpose. It is no accident that the previous chapter ends in the same way as this one –  
*"But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first." (Ch 19)*  
*"So the last will be first, and the first will be last." (Ch.20)*

Here is another warning to the Jews. What Matthew – what Jesus - is saying to Israel is: "You have had your chance boys, and you have failed to take it. Down through the generations you have been warned over and over again. You were the privileged race – the chosen people – but that time is past, and the Kingdom of God is being opened up to the Gentiles, to the whole world.

It is also a **warning** to the **disciples**. Jesus is saying to them "You have had the great privilege of coming early - right at the beginning - into the fellowship of the Christian Church. But others will be coming in, and you must not think you can claim special privilege because you were Christians before they were, or because you were Jews before you were Christians. All are equal in the sight of God.

Here is another fundamental message of the parable: the Kingdom of God is open to all, no matter when they join. The Gentiles have been called later than the Jews, but both are still entitled to the same reward of salvation. Furthermore, that promise of forgiveness and salvation remains open, even though some may respond to the offer late in the day.

*It is never too late to come to Jesus Christ.*

There is reassurance here too: the illustration of the overwhelming love of God – "Don't I have the right to do as I wish with my own money?" – equal shares for all.

The warning to the disciples surely also has implications for all of us here in Orkney in 2020. Maybe we know people who think that, because they have been members of the church for a long time, they can dictate policy. Perhaps there are some who resent the young ones, or the newcomers, with their new ideas. Many a minister will confess to having had a difficult time with some die-hards in the congregation. Perhaps –dare we ask ourselves – are we are like that? Paul continually encourages people to work together, and, if we read between the lines, there is a hint of that in our reading from Philipians.

The Covid Pandemic makes us see things in a different light. With our church buildings closed or under severe restrictions, we need to find new ways of supporting one another in our Christian faith and outreach. We need to work together to ensure that no one is overlooked.

What, then, is the bottom line for this wonderful story? There is **a warning, a reassurance, and a challenge:**

A warning that none of us can expect preferential treatment.

*"Those who are last will be first, and those who are first will be last."*

A **reminder** that the important thing about work is the spirit in which it is done. In 2 Timothy 2:15 we read:

*Do your best to win God's approval as a worker who doesn't need to be ashamed and who teaches only the true message (CEV).*

- a reminder of the right to work, and the self-respect of the worker.
- a reminder, too, about keeping our side of a bargain.

We have all made a bargain, or more properly a commitment, to Jesus Christ – haven't we?

Then there is **reassurance**:

The reassurance of God: it is never too soon, and never too late to come. The promise of forgiveness and salvation is ever open, even though some may respond to that offer at the eleventh hour. It doesn't matter whether we come in the enthusiasm and vigour of youth or in the measured maturity of old age. Our past performance doesn't matter. The offer is open to us all.

We have the reassurance of the *compassion* of God for those desperate unemployed, unwanted men and women. We have the reassurance of the *generosity* of God. We cannot earn what God gives us. The unlimited generosity of God is far beyond human reasoning.

For me, the outstanding take home message of this story is the astonishing, overwhelming love and generosity of Almighty God: generosity and love that are extended to us all, whether we deserve it or not.

The promise carries the **challenge** to us to be as loving and as generous to each other as God is to us.

Let us also pay attention to the warnings.  
Let us rejoice in God's amazing reassurance.  
Let us take up the challenge.

And let us go out and live our lives accordingly. Amen. SDG.

**(Offering) Hymn (4) 643** For me to live is Christ

### **Dedication**

We give thee but thine own, Whate'er the gift may be,  
For all we have is thine alone, A trust, O Lord, from thee.  
May all our gifts, and our very selves, be used in your service  
and in Christ's name. Amen

### **Prayers of Intercession**

Eternal, ever-living, ever-present God,  
in the joys and in the struggles of this day,  
we pray for your people everywhere,  
especially for those who are facing hardships that we can scarcely imagine.

We pray for people who are overburdened, weighed down, demoralised;  
fearful or desolate because of what life has thrown at them:  
disease, and fires, and floods;  
oppression, discrimination, and injustice.

We pray for those engulfed in pain and anguish, facing illness and death,

thinking especially of the tens of thousands of people  
who have contracted the coronavirus in this country and around the world.  
Be with those who are ill,  
and comfort and sustain those whose loved ones have died,  
from Coronavirus, or from any other cause.

Bring peace to those living with uncertainty,  
fearing that they may have been exposed to the virus.  
Give patience to those who are quarantined  
and unable to move freely in their communities.  
Support those separated from friends and relatives,  
especially those unable to visit loved ones in care homes,  
and watch over and protect other people from catching this deadly virus.

Strengthen those who are risking their own lives to care for sick patients.  
May we all be filled with compassion for those who are suffering in any way.

We pray for people troubled in mind and spirit,  
who find no peace or calm;  
people alone and lonely, without friend or comfort;  
those frightened, bewildered, or depressed,  
who see no direction or purpose in their lives.

We pray for people facing financial hardship  
because they have lost their employment or their income,  
for all those unable to find regular work,  
all who struggle to make ends meet.

We pray for those in dangerous jobs:  
for the emergency services,  
all whose work places them close to danger of any kind,  
and for all who have been injured through their work,  
or whose health has been adversely affected.

Compassionate God,  
There are people whose needs and circumstances  
we carry constantly in our hearts and minds.  
In quietness we bring them to you now.

*Pause*

We pray for your church in all the world,  
and for leaders seeking new ways of witnessing to the love of Christ  
and ministering to the needs of people everywhere.

Loving God, we pray for the coming of your kingdom;  
For a time when peace and justice will prevail throughout the world,  
when all will be safe and secure, healed and made whole in you.  
Hear all our prayers, in the name of Jesus. Amen.

**Closing Hymn(5) 419** Thine be the glory, risen conquering Son

### **Closing Words and Benediction**

The Lord sends us to work in his vineyard.  
May we be willing, may we be contented,  
and may we be productive for him.

Go out into the world, and stay safe in the way of Christ  
as you fulfil your calling as the people of God in this place.  
May you know the joy of God who found you,  
the love of Christ who redeemed you,  
and the peace of the Holy Spirit who gifted you to do God's work,  
both now and forever more. 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.