

**ORPHIR and STENNESS CHURCH**  
**Service Handout for Sunday 23.08.20, Proper 16A**

**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, in a world where we are surrounded by many different ideas about God and faith, we think about how we see Jesus.

**Gathering Words and Prayer**

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**

Jesus asked, 'Who do people say that I am?'

We all say that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the Living God.

Gathered in our separate places, yet united in our Christian fellowship, we join our voices with the whole church, let us worship together in his name.

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

**Opening Prayer and Lord's Prayer**

As now, in our own times and in our own places,  
we bring before God our worship and our prayers,  
we remember that we are joined, not only with our own church and community,  
but also with the worldwide family of God's people;  
*that we, who are many, are one body in Christ,*  
*and individually we are members one of another.*

We give thanks, and we pray for the Church in all the world.  
Where we are bound by prejudice, may we be led into new generosity;  
where we are bound by structures and traditions,  
may we find a new freedom.  
Where we are bound by our failures and disappointments,  
or restricted by disease control measures,  
may we be inspired with fresh encouragement,  
that the best of all that has been,  
and the excitement of all that is yet to come,  
may be reflected in us for all to see.

In the presence of Jesus, we acknowledge the times  
when we have fallen short of his teaching and his example.  
We seek his renewing grace that, as forgiven people,  
we may walk prayerfully, open to the needs of others.  
Mindful also of the needs of our own hearts  
and the inadequacies of our own faith,  
may we find in him renewed strength and commitment,  
fresh courage and insight so that,  
freed from the constraints of our own limitations,  
we may witness honestly and powerfully to his glory.

We bring our prayers in his name, as in his words we further 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): 247** Moved by the Gospel, let us move with every gift and art.

**Readings:**

**Romans 12:1-8 (NRSV)**

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect. For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgement, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.

**Contemporary Reading:** from Rev. Dr. D. Scott Stoner:

***'It is in the Shelter of Each Other that the People Live'***

If you are like me, you sometimes take for granted that you are fortunate to have a shelter—a home, apartment, or some kind of physical dwelling—a place where you get to live and sleep on a daily basis. I'm not always as appreciative as I should be about the fact that I have always been blessed to have such a shelter in my life. I am aware that I often take for granted another kind of shelter that I live in, and that is the shelter that the love of friends and family provides for me each day. It is this kind of shelter to which the beautiful Irish proverb that appears above is referring: "It is in the shelter of each other that the people live." There are many ways we can provide the kind of shelter for one another that this proverb describes. As I wrote [recently], one way we can provide shelter is to truly listen to one another. We can also offer any or all of the following: compassion, love, patience, forgiveness, acceptance, and gratitude—all of which are forms of shelter.

This beautiful Irish blessing reminds us of the many kinds of shelter we can offer to one another:

*May you always have...  
Walls for the winds  
A roof for the rain  
Tea beside the fire  
Laughter to cheer you  
Those you love near you  
And all your heart might desire.*

**Hymn (3): 645** I'm not ashamed to own my Lord

**Gospel Reading: Matthew 16:13-20(NRSV)**

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, 'Who do people say that the Son of Man is?' And they said, 'Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.' He said to them, 'But who do you

say that I am?' Simon Peter answered, 'You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.' And Jesus answered him, 'Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.' Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

## **Message**

Paul wrote his Letter to the Romans about the year AD58. It is different from his other letters because he was writing to a church that he did not found himself, and with which he had had no personal contact. It also differs from the other Letters because he was not trying to deal with some specific problem, but rather setting out his own theological position. He needed to do that because, at a time when the church was developing very rapidly, there were people who opposed him and had been spreading slanders and false accusations against him. He was setting out the very essence of his belief in order to win the support of the Roman Christians.

Paul is convinced that although there are differences in beliefs and emphasis between the various branches of the developing church, they are all members of the same body. Read on into chapters 14 and 15 and you find Paul telling us that some people take a narrower, stricter view of their religious obligations than others, and warning against passing judgement on others. "*Why do you pass judgement on your brother or sister .... for we will all stand before the judgement seat of God*" (Rom. 14:10)

Echoes here of Jesus' own words – "*Judge not that ye be not judged*".

Paul's point is that, just as the members of the body do not argue with one another, don't envy one another, or argue about their relative importance, neither should we. Just as each part of the body has its own special function, some prominent, some unseen, so each member of the Christian community has a task to do, and it is only when every one of them contributes the help of his or her own task that the body of the Church – which is the body of Christ – functions as it ought to do. The whole is far greater than the sum of its parts.

Earlier in his Letter Paul has been dealing with the fact that the Jews, the chosen people of God, had rejected Christ, and, by doing that, had opened the way for the Gentiles. Now he turns his attention from the problems of how Christians – whether from a Jewish or Gentile background – should live together in community.

In his other letters – Galatians is a prime example – you find Paul struggling against opponents who insisted that converts had to be circumcised and obey at least some of the Law of Moses before they could become Christians: in other words that they had to become Jews before they could become Christians. Paul's sympathies lie with the more liberal party, and he makes that quite clear. He lays down the great principle that no one must ever do anything to hurt the conscience of someone who is weaker, or to put a stumbling block in the way of someone whose beliefs are different. We must never do anything that makes it harder for someone else to be a Christian.

Paul had to face up to Jewish Christians who insisted on rigid obedience to the Jewish Law – people who insisted on systems that corrected other people's failings while leaving their own untouched. No, says Paul, let each one of us look honestly at our own strengths and weaknesses and thank God that they balance each other out in the Christian community. Here in Chapter 12 he urges us to value the differences within the Church. He is determined to avoid a "them and us" situation:

**“Be transformed by the renewing of your minds,”** says Paul – the Greek word might also be translated “mind-set” – allow yourself to be transformed *in the way you think*.

In some ways his situation is quite similar to the circumstances we have in our own islands. In Orkney we have communities with Christian people from a wide range of social and cultural and religious and theological backgrounds. In some places all these people work together very well for the work of Christ and for the greater good; in others less well – it depends on having an open mind and an open heart. If we accept Paul’s assurance that **“we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another”**, if we can learn to use the gifts that we have been given, while still recognising that “we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us” we *can* grow into one body by the grace of God and the work of the Spirit.

Paul reminds us that unity is possible even in diversity. We *can* all work together. We all have our God-given gifts, and we must use them in his service – but use them with sincerity and humility, so that everyone can keep a proper sense of his/her own place within God’s scheme of things.

We **MUST** work together. We need to get our priorities right.

It is said that Christians are the most persecuted group in the contemporary world. In a whole list of countries where Muslims are in the majority - Iraq, Iran, Syria, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia, Yemen and many others – Christians face discrimination, persecution, repression, violence and in some cases death, mass murder or ethnic cleansing.

The magazine *Christianity Today* recently estimated that, every day, 8 Christians worldwide are killed because of their faith. Every week, 182 churches or Christian buildings are attacked. Every month, 309 Christians are imprisoned unjustly.

Christians in these places are not concerned about who is Protestant, or Catholic, Conservative or Progressive, or Baptist, or Brethren – or whatever. They are not arguing about minor differences in interpretation of Scripture, or about same-sex relationships, or women clergy, or subjects that no one is actually talking about. They are struggling to maintain their faith in Jesus Christ, crucified, dead and risen, in the face of opposition that we cannot imagine.

In our country we are unlikely to face death for our beliefs, but we face insidious opposition nonetheless. The New Atheism of Dawkins and his disciples and successors ridicules religion in general, and Christianity in particular. What about the “outsiders” who see us as a bunch of hypocrites? People “out there” are quick to make disparaging remarks about the Church. “*Look at so-and-so*”, they say: “*If that’s what Christians are like, I want nothing to do with it.*”

How would we measure up in the eyes of these people?

Jesus said:

*“Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.”*

How brightly does our light shine?

Paul’s words have a direct bearing on the Church of Scotland at the present time. The Church of Scotland – all the churches – are going through difficult times. The Covid Pandemic comes on top of diminishing congregations and a serious shortage of ministers and leaders, at a time when a whole generation of people ‘*out there*’ are being invited to

live a life of disbelief, even unbelief. If, and when, the pandemic comes to an end, and we return to 'normal', it may well be a very different normal, for the churches as for everything else. We can be sure that there are very challenging times ahead: challenges, and opportunities. I hope – I believe – that people still want purpose and faith in their lives, and the Church, of whatever form or denomination, needs to be ready to help provide them.

Mahatma Gandhi once made a challenging observation:

*I like your Christ, I do not like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ.*

If the people 'out there' need the church at all, they need it to be like Jesus. We are the church: the Body of Christ. How do we measure up?  
Are we like Jesus?

Are we one body in Christ, and individually are we members one of another?

At the end of our reading from Matthew's Gospel, Jesus poses the question:  
'Who do you say that I am?'

As one body, and with Simon Peter, can we answer:  
'You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.'

Amen. SDG

**(Offering) Hymn (4) 502** Take my life, Lord, let it be consecrated, glad and free.

### **Dedication of Offering**

Gracious God,  
Each thing we have received came from you.  
Each thing for which we hope will come from you.  
Each thing we enjoy is of your giving.  
Each thing for which we ask comes from your disposing.  
We offer to you tokens of our work and our prosperity.  
Bless our gifts that they may be used to advance your work in the Church and in the world,  
Through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

### **Prayers of Intercession**

God of all people and all places,  
bringing our own hopes and fears,  
and ready to be transformed in our thoughts and our actions,  
we come to you with our prayers for your world and all its people.

God of love,  
We pray for all those divided from others by political, social or historical barriers.  
We pray for all those who suffer discrimination  
because of their race, their colour, their caste or gender.  
We pray for those who are excluded or unheeded  
because of their poverty, or lifestyle, or history;  
for all those whose hopes are rejected  
because of their sexuality, or disability, or identity.  
We pray for new understanding that may help us all  
to reach out to those we do not know,  
that we all may know the fullness of life that Jesus promised.

God of wisdom,  
we pray for your church, in all its diversity,  
that, recognising the gifts of all our members,  
and our liberty to differ on points of interpretation and procedure,  
we may yet be one body, united in our faith  
in the all-encompassing love of God as shown in Jesus Christ.  
Where there has been discord and dispute among us,  
whether here or in the wider world,  
may we forgive, and be forgiven, as we learn and grow together.

We pray for Christians suffering discrimination and persecution for their faith,  
in North Korea, in China, in the Middle East,  
and in so many other places,  
that they may know your strength and your protection.

God of compassion,  
we pray for all who need to know your care.  
Where the events and struggles of life pose difficult questions;  
where the Covid Pandemic has brought suffering,  
and loss of life, and grief and despair;  
where people have lost their jobs, or have seen their businesses and incomes disappear,  
we ask for your loving support and guidance.  
We pray for those who are ill,  
for those who treat them, those who nurse them, and for all who wait and worry.  
May they all know your presence and your healing and liberating touch.

God of all,  
in our own quietness,  
we open our hearts to your world and all its people,  
bringing our particular concerns and dreams,  
seeking your wisdom and support,  
and yet ready to be transformed in our thoughts and our actions.

*Pause*

Loving God,  
hear these, and all our prayers,  
through Jesus, our Friend, our Master, our Lord. Amen

**Closing Hymn(5) 497** Almighty Father of all things that be

**Closing Words and Benediction**

Go out into the world in peace.  
Love your God with all your heart.  
Be challenged by promptings of the Spirit.  
Hear the call to serve Christ, and be obedient to God's will.  
And may God bless you,  
the Spirit restore you,  
and Christ's presence strengthen 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.