

ORPHIR and STENNESS CHURCH
Handout for Sunday 24th.May 2020, Easter 7A

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.

Gathering Words and Prayer

In the prayers today I have adapted some material from the Christian Aid website.

We pause for a few moments to remember that we are in the presence of God ...

A prayer before silence:

Loving God,
in the silence beyond words we seek your presence,
looking to you for comfort, for strength, protection and reassurance;
breathing with gratitude, holding on to hope, and trusting with faith
that, in these troubling times, you are still God,
and that your love reaches to the ends of the earth.
Be present with us now.

(Silence)

Through Christ our Lord, Amen

Call to worship

Gathered in our separate places, yet united in our Christian fellowship, we join with the whole church, across the world, and across time in the worship of God

Hymn (1): 457 All hail the power of Jesus' name

Opening Prayer and Lord's Prayer

I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, ... nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (*Romans 8:38-39*)

Let us Pray:

God of heaven and earth,
in these times of isolation,
when we are separated from loved ones, distant from friends and neighbours,
apprehensive for our own wellbeing,
we thank you that there is nothing in all of creation, not even coronavirus,
that is able to separate us from your love.

May your love that never fails continue to be shared
through the kindness of strangers looking out
for each other, and for neighbours, near and far,
all recognising our shared vulnerability,
each of us grateful for our every breath,
and willing everyone else to know the gift of a full and healthy life.
Keep us all in your care.

Gracious God,

whose love never fails,
we remember that, even in the darkest moments, love brings hope;
love compels us to stand together in prayer with our others,
with people we know and people we don't,
and especially with our sisters and brothers living in poverty.
As we pray in our individual homes – around the nation and around the world –
we are united as one family.

God of love,
strengthen our innermost being with your love,
the love that bears all things,
even the burden of this global pandemic,
the anxiety of watching for symptoms, watching and waiting for this to pass,
keeping our gaze fixed on you,
and looking out for the vulnerable.

Renew us in the belief and the hope
that all things are possible through your creative love:
for strangers to become friends;
for science to find solutions;
for generous sharing of resources,
so that everyone, everywhere, may have what they need.

May your love that never ends be our comfort, strength and guide,
for the wellbeing of all, and always to your glory,
through Jesus Christ our Lord,
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): 438 The Head That Once Was Crowned with Thorns

Readings:

Acts 1: 6-14: *The Ascension of Jesus*

So when they had come together, they asked him, 'Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?' He replied, 'It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.' When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. While he was going and they were gazing up towards heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. They said, 'Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up towards heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.'

Matthias Chosen to Replace Judas

Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a sabbath day's journey away. When they had entered the city, they went to the room upstairs where they were staying, Peter, and John, and James, and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of

James. All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers

1 Peter 4:12-14; and 5: 6-11; New Revised Standard Version, Anglicised (NRSVA)

Suffering as a Christian:

Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that is taking place among you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice in so far as you are sharing Christ's sufferings, so that you may also be glad and shout for joy when his glory is revealed. If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the spirit of glory, which is the Spirit of God, is resting on you.

Chapter 5: 6-11

Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, so that he may exalt you in due time. Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you. Discipline yourselves; keep alert. Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour. Resist him, steadfast in your faith, for you know that your brothers and sisters throughout the world are undergoing the same kinds of suffering. And after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, support, strengthen, and establish you. To him be the power for ever and ever. Amen

Hymn (3): 622 We sing a love that sets all people free

Gospel Reading: John 17: 1-11: *Jesus Prays for His Disciples*

After Jesus had spoken these words, he looked up to heaven and said, 'Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you, since you have given him authority over all people, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do. So now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed.

'I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; for the words that you gave to me I have given to them, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me. I am asking on their behalf; I am not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those whom you gave me, because they are yours. All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them. And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one.'

Message

In today's world we have come to think that "facts" mean "truth". For something to be true it has to be factually correct, as if somebody could have recorded the events with a camcorder. If it can't be proved, it can't be true. That's why the idea of the bodily ascension of Jesus is a difficult subject for many people, even for those who can make the leap of faith in the resurrection of Jesus.

The idea of Jesus being suddenly spirited up towards the sky, in front of the disciples' eyes, and disappearing among the clouds, seems more about magic and myth than about reality. Our knowledge of the world and space is vastly different from the perceptions of the people who wrote our Bible. We know that "heaven" is not just "up there", not just a short distance beyond our sky. We know that the nearest star to us is our own sun, 93 million miles away. The Sun's nearest neighbour, the triple-star Alpha Centauri, is 4.3 *light-years* away. That's about 25 trillion miles away from Earth – nearly 300,000 times the distance from the Earth to

the sun. Astronomers tell us that our galaxy, the Milky Way, contains half-a-trillion stars. Its centre is about 26,000 light-years from Earth, it is 100,000 light years across, and it is only one of 170 billion galaxies.

Still with me? Mind-boggling stuff. Our minds – mine anyway - can't imagine these vast distances. The point is that our narrow understanding of what truth means doesn't liberate us: it limits us. We can't see the wood for the trees, as the saying goes. The Bible isn't concerned with the question about 'how' something happened, but rather 'why' something has happened. We don't need to get bogged down with *how* Jesus ascended to heaven. Instead we need to concentrate upon the question of why Luke (who wrote Acts) thought it was vital to record that the earthly life of the risen Jesus came to an end.

In his Gospel, Luke's key message about the resurrection is to insist that the *resurrection* was a reality, not some sort of transcendent vision: that the disciples actually witnessed Jesus eating, drinking, walking and talking - that he was truly alive. In the same way Luke wants to tell the world that, after the resurrection appearances, Jesus's life on earth came to a definite end, and he returned to the Father. At the end of Luke's story, Jesus ascends to heaven, and two heavenly witnesses confirm that his life on earth for now is over.

We should remember that we find similar events in the Old Testament, such as Elijah being taken up to God and his power being transferred to Elisha. It is not for us to worry about the details. Is not so much "how" it happened as "why" it happened. It is the end of a chapter. Luke makes sure that Jesus is not left to a particular time, or a particular place, in human history. The story of the ascension broadens a specific story about Jesus Christ into a universal affirmation that God's glorious work in the resurrection *goes beyond time and place*. It means that we, in our time and place, in the here and now, can know the Risen Lord Jesus Christ.

Only Luke, who wrote both Luke and Acts, records any details of Jesus's ascension. Even so, he spends little time on the ascension itself, before reminding the disciples that there was work to be done here on earth. The disciples get a bit of a telling off from the angels too: why are you standing there looking to heaven? Your work is here on earth - that has been made clear to you. They have to take up Christ's work of spreading the Good News all over the world, the Good News that through Jesus Christ comes the blessing of eternal life.

More important than the details of the ascension is John's account of Jesus's prayer at the completion of his earthly work, which we read today. Jesus saw the Cross as the climax of his life – as the completion of his mission, and the way to the glory of eternity. In his prayer to God his Father, Jesus says:

I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do.

If Jesus had stopped short of the cross, he would have left his work uncompleted. Jesus came into the world to tell people, and show people, the immeasurable love of God. If he had stopped short of the cross, it would have been like saying that God's love went only thus far, but no further. By going to the cross, Jesus demonstrated that there was nothing that the love of God was not prepared to do and suffer for humanity: there is literally no limit to the love of God. As Paul says, *Nothing in all creation can separate us from God's love for us in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

More than that, by his resurrection, Jesus demonstrated that the cross was not the end. In his prayer he spells out what he means by "eternal life." Notice carefully what he says in his prayer for the disciples:

This is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.

Notice too that a few verses later he extends his prayer to include *'those who will believe in [him] through their word'*. That's us!

Eternal life is not some add-on after we die, a reward for 'good' behaviour. *Rather it is eternal life to know God and to know Jesus Christ whom he has sent.* The Greek word used here for *eternal* has not so much to do with the duration of life. Life that went on for ever would not necessarily be a blessing. It has more to do with the *quality* of life. To know eternal life is to experience, *in the here and now*, something of the joy, the blessing, the peace of knowing God as the one true God, and knowing that Jesus Christ is the One whom God sent. To be on the most intimate terms of friendship with God, through his Son Jesus Christ. What a thought! That's what we are aiming for. That's what Jesus taught us to pray for – "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done *on earth* as it is in heaven".

And – yes, I do believe in an afterlife, but what that means, and the form that it may take, are for discussion another time.

In his prayer for his disciples Jesus acknowledges that his followers are going to have a tough job. They have to bear witness to his life, to his death, to his resurrection – to the message that God in Christ brings love, forgiveness, healing, peace and hope to all humanity. But they will be strengthened and equipped for the job by the grace of Almighty God, whose loving-kindness blesses and equips all those whom he calls to undertake his work. As Peter tells us in the other reading set for today, *'You will suffer for a while, but God will make you complete, steady, strong, and firm'*. (1 Peter 5:10, CEV)

Jesus knows that, after he leaves them, his disciples will feel abandoned, bereft. "I am no longer in the world" he prays, "but they are." So he asks protection for them, not only protection from the things we might want to be protected from, like fear or persecution. He asks for protection for his followers *"so that they may be one"*, as he and the Father are one.

Jesus prayed for the **unity** of his disciples. Are we *one in Christ* in the Church today?

As the Church of Jesus Christ, we are the voice and the hands of God in this world. Like that first motley crew of disciples, we are called to do a job. We are not to be distracted by always looking towards heaven. We are to concentrate on the reality of the world around us, and to bring the Good News of Christ to all people – especially, as the Psalmist reminds us, the poor, the weak and the vulnerable. And we are to do it together, as brothers and sisters in Christ.

In the words of the late Rev. Professor William Barclay:

"Where there are divisions, there is exclusiveness, where there is competition between the churches, the cause of Christianity is harmed and the prayer of Jesus frustrated. The gospel cannot be truly preached in any congregation which is not a united band of brothers and sisters. The world cannot be evangelised by competing churches."

Barclay goes on to say that Jesus prayed that his disciples might be as fully one, as he and the Father are one; but, he adds, there is no prayer of Jesus which has been so hindered by individual Christians from being answered as this.

There are currently 7 separate Presbyterian churches in Scotland. Last time I checked, there were about 340 Christian denominations in UK, with a great many more worldwide. In face of the doubters and scoffers and the New Atheism of Dawkins and his disciples, what a force we might be if we were all united simply as *Christians!*

As we read in Acts, Jesus gives his disciples a final reassurance. The Holy Spirit will come upon them to empower them for his work. Then, as Jesus had told them, the apostles return to Jerusalem to watch and wait for the coming of the Spirit. Luke gives us a glimpse of the

inner life of this early Christian community. He tells us that the apostles, the women, and Jesus's own family gathered together frequently to pray, 'united' - 'with one accord' - in spiritual unity

The take home – or 'stay at home' - message for today?

United in the Spirit in the immeasurable love of God.

Amen. Soli Deo Gloria.

(Offering) Hymn (4) 436 Christ Triumphant (Tune Mission Praise 77)

Dedication of Offering:

For the beauty of the earth,
for the glory of the skies,
for the love which from our birth
over and around us lies;
Lord of all, to thee we raise
this our hymn of grateful praise.

We bring you Lord these gifts, tokens of our prosperity.
Take them, and take our lives, to be used for your purposes and to your glory.
Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Prayers of Intercession

Loving God,
In these times of anxiety and uncertainty we bring to you our prayers for other people,
especially those directly affected by the Coronavirus pandemic.

Restoring and healing God,
we thank you for medical workers everywhere, putting the welfare of others before their own;
in these challenging times separating themselves from their family and loved ones,
comforting the concerned and the bereaved, reassuring the anxious and vulnerable,
working to heal and restore people who are ill.

We pray for scientists seeking to develop medicines and vaccines,
and for your guidance for all who have the responsibility
of deciding policy and allocating resources.
Be their guide and strength, their wisdom and hope.

We pray for ordinary people in ordinary places, looking out for one another,
recognising that social distancing need not mean isolation and loneliness;
that contact by telephone and internet, or by notes pushed through letterboxes
can bring welcome help and support.

We pray for those who are unwell, and for all who worry about loved ones;
for those immuno-suppressed, or compromised because of underlying conditions;
all those 'most at risk' of serious illness,
and for people grieving for family or friends who have died.

At this time, we bring to you also all the people who, for any reason, we carry in our hearts
and minds today.

Pause

O God be their healer,
their comfort and strength, their shield and protection,
be their security, their safety, and their close companion.
Teach us – show us – what we can do to help,
even at this time of separation and lockdown.

God, in your mercy, hear our prayer.
In Jesus' name we ask. Amen.

Closing Hymn(5) 522 The Church is wherever God's people are praising

Closing Words and Benediction

Now may the peace of God, which is beyond all understanding,
guard your hearts and your thoughts in Christ Jesus;
and may 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.