

ORPHIR and STENNESS CHURCH
Service Handout for Orphir/Stenness, Sunday 25.10.20; Proper 25A

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

The greatest commandment, Jesus tells us, is the law of love. What we are asked to do seems simple enough: we are just to love God and love one another. That is the challenge that Jesus gives us.

Let us first take a few moments to be quiet, and to know that God is near

A gathering prayer

Let us thank God for each other, as we share in worship,
as we come to pray and praise.
Let us thank God for the witness of Jesus,
and for the gift of the Holy Spirit to inspire and move us. Amen.

Call to Worship

Come, love the Lord your God
with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind.
Come, love your neighbours
with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind.
Come, love yourself
with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind.
**For this is the greatest commandment,
that you love one another as I have loved you.**

Hymn (1): Hymn 132 Immortal, invisible

Opening Prayer and Lord's Prayer

In our own familiar place, a place of peace and of safety,
we bring ourselves to a moment of quietness.
In these strange and worrying times, we seek to cast off the cares of the world,
and, for a time, to reflect on the things of God,
so that our spiritual batteries may be recharged,
our direction refocused, our energy renewed;
that we may let go of all that hampers us,
and be free to think quietly about those with whom we share this time,
and about those we carry in our hearts.
We seek the renewing grace of God, that, in turn,
we may bring renewal to others.

Acknowledging that often we get things wrong,
we reflect on things done, and things left undone,
that we might have managed better.
May we know ourselves forgiven, renewed, and released

to share afresh in the eternal love of God.

We come in thanksgiving for the gentle caring people in the world:
people whose love for God and for their neighbours radiates from their lives;
for the comfort of voice and touch,
for the encouraging smile, the listening ear,
for quiet reassurance and understanding,
for patience and perseverance extended to us.
We give thanks to God, who has touched the lives of these people,
enabling them in turn to touch our lives,
to strengthen us in our faith and enrich our knowledge of him.
May we, in turn may treat others with the same kindness and concern.

Collect:

Almighty God,
who gave the Law through Moses
and grace and mercy in Jesus Christ;
Grant, we pray, that this Law of love may be so written upon our hearts,
that whatever we do in Your Name, we do humbly,
whatever we seek in Your Kingdom, we seek faithfully,
and whatever we give of ourselves, we give lovingly;
Through the servant King, Jesus, our Saviour,
in whose words we 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): Hymn 198 Let us build a house

Bible Readings:

Psalm 1: *The Two Ways*

Happy are those
who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or take the path that sinners tread,
or sit in the seat of scoffers;
but their delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law they meditate day and night.
They are like trees planted by streams of water,
which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither.
In all that they do, they prosper.

The wicked are not so, but are like chaff that the wind drives away.
Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgement,
nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous;
for the Lord watches over the way of the righteous,
but the way of the wicked will perish.

1 Thessalonians 2:1-12: (NRSVA): *Paul's Ministry in Thessalonica*

You yourselves know, brothers and sisters, that our coming to you was not in vain, but
though we had already suffered and been shamefully maltreated at Philippi, as you know,
we had courage in our God to declare to you the gospel of God in spite of great opposition.
For our appeal does not spring from deceit or impure motives or trickery, but just as we
have been approved by God to be entrusted with the message of the gospel, even so we

speaking, not to please mortals, but to please God who tests our hearts. As you know and as God is our witness, we never came with words of flattery or with a pretext for greed; nor did we seek praise from mortals, whether from you or from others, though we might have made demands as apostles of Christ. But we were gentle among you, like a nurse tenderly caring for her own children. So deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you have become very dear to us.

You remember our labour and toil, brothers and sisters; we worked night and day, so that we might not burden any of you while we proclaimed to you the gospel of God. You are witnesses, and God also, how pure, upright, and blameless our conduct was towards you believers. As you know, we dealt with each one of you like a father with his children, urging and encouraging you and pleading that you should lead a life worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory.

Hymn (3) 549 How deep the Father's love for us

Gospel Reading: Matt. 22:34-46; (NRSVA): *The Greatest Commandment*

When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. 'Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?' He said to him, "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.'" This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: "You shall love your neighbour as yourself." On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.'

The Question about David's Son

Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them this question: 'What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?' They said to him, 'The son of David.' He said to them, 'How is it then that David by the Spirit calls him Lord, saying, "The Lord said to my Lord, 'Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet'"?

If David thus calls him Lord, how can he be his son?' No one was able to give him an answer, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions.

Amen. *Hear what the spirit is saying to the Church.*

Message

Today the clocks went back one hour to GMT – so maybe you've had an extra hour in bed! Next week begins the countdown to Advent, and to Christmas. With all the restrictions, this has been a strange and worrying year, and maybe we have paid less attention than usual to the changing seasons. Now, as the evenings grow darker, and the lighter nights of the fine summer we have had fade into a distant memory, we prepare to batten down our hatches not already battened down, and prepare for winter.

In all this time of change, we may well wonder what God is saying to us. Today's readings from Matthew and from Thessalonians prompt us to think about what is important to us. These last months have brought a lot of changes in our world, and in the ways we interact with other people, and we need to be reminded of something or someone permanent to hang on to. Our readings are about relationships with God, and with other people. We consider what Jesus says about the important things in life.

You may have noticed that the Old Testament is quite a long book. I read somewhere that it has 929 chapters, 23,145 verses, and, depending on which translation you use,

something like 600,000 words. So, when Jesus says that, of all these 23,145 verses, 23,143 of them depend on only two 'headline verses', we need to pay attention.

What Jesus is saying is that these two verses are a God-given executive summary of 1500 years of Scripture, and they help us to check that we have not missed the heart of the message.

"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: "You shall love your neighbour as yourself."

The next verse doesn't quite mean that these two commands are all you need – but it does claim that everything in the Jewish Law leads to these two. God still calls us to shape our lives by these two commands – simple to read aloud, without even taking a breath, but utterly absorbing to live out, and claiming every breath we take.

Today's reading shows us another in a series of incidents where the Jewish religious leaders are trying to make trouble for Jesus. Each time, he has got the better of them. He is not being confrontational here: he quotes from the *Shema*, which every good Jew recites twice a day. We know it as the Great Commandment:

Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength. (Deut. 6:5)

Jesus adds "*with all your mind*", to remind us that real love for God involves our thinking, and our planning, and our actions, as well as our emotions.

"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." And: "You shall love your neighbour as yourself."

The famous Jewish Rabbi, Hillel, who lived about the same time as Jesus, was asked to sum up the entire Torah. He said:

"That which is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow. That is the whole Torah: the rest is the explanation; go and learn."

This is a *negative* form of the Golden Rule.

Earlier in Matthew's Gospel Jesus turns it round the other way:

"In everything, do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets". (Matt. 7:12, NRSV)

*Not advice to refrain from doing to others something hateful to yourself: instead, a **positive instruction to go out and do good.***

St. Augustine said, "Love God and do as you please."

The Greek language has several different words for love. The main word used for love in the New Testament - the word used here - is *agapē*. A better translation might be **loving-kindness**. This word expresses more than an emotion. It is not a passive word: instead, it is an active response to God, an action expressed in kindness, and mercy, and patience and generosity. It is something we *do*.

God's love is active. God chooses to love Israel above all nations and to bring his love through this chosen people. To love God with all our heart, and soul, and mind is to choose to respond to God even as God chooses to love us. It is not really anything to do with feelings and emotions.

Biblical love - Christian love - is an active choice, not a feeling.

This means that, when we look at the Great Commandment, we have to think of love in this Biblical sense. If we think of love as purely an emotion, then to love God with all our heart, mind, and soul seems very difficult. God often seems distant, and unknown. We cannot look into God's eyes, or wrap our arms around the Spirit. We can't even see the face of Jesus: maybe, if we could, we might experience a profound feeling of love. Yet we are commanded to love God.

Loving our neighbour is even harder. If love is only how we feel about a particular person next to us, we are as likely to be turned away as moved to love. How do you love somebody you don't like? How do you look into the face of an enemy – someone who has done you harm - and feel unqualified love? Impossible, you might say.

But biblical love is not passive. Biblical love is something we *do*, something generous and continuous. To love our neighbour as ourselves is to act toward the other as we would act toward ourselves and those close to us. We are to treat strangers as well as we treat those that we love emotionally. We have to make a conscious choice, and to love even those people we don't like. Not easy!

Someone said that what impressed him about Christian love and grace was not what was preached in Church on Sunday, but how the people helped the needy from Monday to Friday.

What about love of God? How do we love God?

We make a positive choice to serve God in every way.

We can love God with our heart: through generosity to God's people.

We can love God with our soul: by worshipping God, and through praying for our neighbours and ourselves.

We can love God with our minds: by studying his Word, and letting it show us where we go wrong, letting it correct us, enlighten us, and inspire us to loving action in the world around us.

Jesus says that the two commandments are connected: "the greatest and first commandment ..." and the "second is like it": 'Love your neighbour as you love yourself.'

When we love God's people, we are loving God as well. In the 1st Letter of John we read: "*Those who say, 'I love God', and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen.*" (1 John 4:20)

Love for God and love for others are inseparable. We are not commanded to *feel the emotion* of love. We are commanded to *act* in love. Sometimes the one follows the other. In Christ, we can do it, even if we don't feel like it.

Putting into practice the command to love our neighbour does not make it any less important to love God. Indeed, sometimes humanists and atheists – who don't believe in God – show more love to their neighbour than do many Christians.

The first part comes first! God is the reference point for all human life.

What we owe to God is not obedience to a specific law, but a total approach to life – with all our heart, with all our soul, with all our mind.

We are made in the Image of God. Not only that: we are made in the image of a God who has loved us from the beginning of time. A God who loved the world so much that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not die but have eternal life.

I like this quotation from Karl Barth, one of the most important theologians of the twentieth century. When asked how he would summarize the essence of all the books and the millions of words he had published, Barth replied:

"Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so."

Maybe we can't live up to those high standards, but that doesn't mean that we should just give up and not try. No! Far from it!

God wants us to succeed. We have the encouragement of the God who loves us, the God who is all around us, and within us, the God who strengthens us and who sends us out to love other people. The God who tells us to love more fully and more perfectly, because, although showing perfect love is impossible for us, nothing is impossible with God.

Jesus said "I have come in order that you might have life — life in all its fullness." (John 10:10)

That is a staggering promise.

We are the body of Christ. At a time when our church buildings are closed, or seriously restricted, it is good to remember that. Not only are we called, and expected, to follow Christ: we are empowered through the Spirit to live fully in the way of life and in the ways of the kingdom of God revealed by Jesus. Jesus said, "*The kingdom of God is within you.*"

The Spirit of God, the Spirit of Jesus, in all its love and forgiveness, lives within us to inspire us to live a life of righteousness, of right relationships with God and with all the people around us.

In that belief, in that faith, in that confidence, and despite all our worries, let us step forward into this day, and this week, and the rest of our lives, to do our best to love the Lord our God with all our heart, and with all our soul, and with all our mind, and our neighbours as ourselves.

Amen. Soli Deo Gloria.

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

Dedication of Offering

Lord God,
You inspire us to love
beyond the limits of those we know, or those with whom we are comfortable.
May the gifts from our time and talents remind us
that all we have is from you, and encourage us to love not just with our hearts,
but with imagination, and without reserve.
In the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

Prayers of Intercession

Gracious God,
In this brief time of worship,
and remembering that we shall return shortly to all of these things,
we bring to you all the blessings and all the concerns of our daily lives.

As we give thanks for all the good things you have given us,

we think also of our preoccupation with our own needs,
and our leaning towards selfishness.
In repentance and in faith,
as we strive to be more like Jesus.
we turn from the world to you,
for you are our God, and we are your people.
Help us to act in love for you, and with you,
with all our heart and soul and mind and strength.
May your kingdom come;
may we love our neighbour as ourselves.

We pray for those who have brought us to faith, who have shown us your love,
who have tended to our needs, physical, emotional and spiritual.
We pray for those who have put themselves in harm's way for us and for others,
and for those whose lives have been made harder
because they have sought to serve you and to help their fellow human beings.
We pray for those whose selfless acts have caused them distress;
for those imprisoned and tortured for their faith and witness;
for all those who, at any cost, have shared the gospel of Christ.
May they be blessed in abundance with your love and care.
May your kingdom come;
may we love our neighbour as ourselves.

We pray for peace in the world:
peace between nations;
peace within families;
peace where there is oppression;
peace where there is injustice.
May your kingdom come,
may we love our neighbour as ourselves.

In these troubled times we pray for all who are in any way affected by the Covid-19
Pandemic:
those suffering from the disease;
those who wait and worry;
those anxiously awaiting the result of tests.
We pray for doctors, nurses, and medical teams,
for all who care for those affected, often at risk to themselves,
and for scientists working to develop vaccines and effective tests and treatments.
May your kingdom come,
may we love our neighbour as ourselves.

We pray for people who have lost their means of income,
and for those who live in fear
because they do not have enough to be able to feed themselves or their family.
May we all learn to share the generous bounty of your world.
We pray for all who have lost loved ones because of this disease, or for any other reason,
that they may know your comfort and your peace.

We bring to you all those for whom we have special concerns:
Pause

May your kingdom come,
may we love our neighbour as ourselves.
In the name of Christ, we pray. Amen.

Closing Hymn(5) Hymn 644 O Jesus, I have promised

Closing Words and Benediction

We have been given this new week
in which to honour the God who is easy to love
by loving the neighbours who are sometimes difficult to love.
Not in our own strength are we so commanded,
but in the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit,
and in the love of the Lord Jesus through whom all things are possible.
Let us go on our way rejoicing.
And may the blessing of almighty God,
the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit,
rest upon you and remain with you
now and for ever. 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.

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