

ORPHIR and STENNESS CHURCH
Handout for Sunday 27th December 2020; Christmas 1B

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, or Google them and listen online. 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

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

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): 320 Joy to the world

Opening Prayer and Lord's Prayer

As we bring our prayers to God on this last Sunday of the year, let us not rush in with torrents of words.

Let us pause in quietness;

feel his presence,

all around us, and within us.

Pause

Each one of us is as a pebble in the ocean of God's love.

We think of the last week, and the last year;
a year dominated by Covid.

We remember worry, and uncertainty:

someone who is ill, or has been ill;

someone who has died.

Pause

Remembering ourselves,

we think of something we got wrong;

a word spoken, or left unspoken;

an opportunity missed to carry God's love to someone else.

Pause

Among all the restrictions and anxieties, there have been good things too.

Let us recall the good things:

something that went well; that brought satisfaction or pleasure;

the kindness of a relative – a friend – a stranger.

Pause

We remember the Christmas season, and the things we have missed:

church services; carols; family gatherings; good fellowship.

We remember also the continuing things, that nothing and nobody can take away:

the Light that shines in the darkness, the darkness that has never overcome it;

the Word made flesh, that lived among us,
and we have seen his glory, the glory of a father's only son,
full of grace and truth.

Pause

In all the worries and uncertainties of the present time,
and into the year ahead,
let us entrust ourselves to his care and his guidance.

Let us sum up all our prayers in the words that he taught us:
*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): 295 Who would think that what was needed

Readings:

Isaiah 61:10 – 62: 3: (NRSVA) *The Good News of Deliverance*

I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my whole being shall exult in my God;
for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation,
he has covered me with the robe of righteousness,
as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland,
and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.
For as the earth brings forth its shoots,
and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up,
so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise
to spring up before all the nations.

The Vindication and Salvation of Zion

For Zion's sake I will not keep silent, and for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest,
until her vindication shines out like the dawn, and her salvation like a burning torch.
The nations shall see your vindication, and all the kings your glory;
and you shall be called by a new name that the mouth of the Lord will give.
You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the Lord, and a royal diadem in the hand of
your God.

Galatians 4:4-7 (NRSVA)

But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the
law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as
children. And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts,
crying, 'Abba! Father!' So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an
heir, through God.

Hymn (3): 501 Take this moment, sign and space

Gospel Reading: Luke 2:22-40 (NRSVA): *Jesus Is Presented in the Temple*

When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up
to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the law of the Lord, 'Every
firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord'), and they offered a sacrifice according
to what is stated in the law of the Lord, 'a pair of turtle-doves or two young pigeons.'

Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and
devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. It had

been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying,

'Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.'

And the child's father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, 'This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too.'

There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband for seven years after her marriage, then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshipped there with fasting and prayer night and day. At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

The Return to Nazareth

When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favour of God was upon him.

Message

I hope that, despite all the restrictions and upheaval, you all had a pleasant time over Christmas. It is still Christmas, of course, and whatever else has happened this year, the Christmas story should still be foremost in our minds today. However, this is also the last Sunday of 2020, a year that has brought Covid-19, lockdown, isolation, shielding, with devastating consequences for jobs and livelihoods, families and nations, and for mental and physical health – all of this in addition to the horrifying death-toll. The last Sunday of the year is always a time for looking back, and looking back on 2020 may well include regret for losses of all kinds, but also, I hope, thanksgiving for mutual support.

It's a time for looking forward to 2021, and the hope that the vaccines will be effective and readily available. We pray that the Pandemic will be brought under control. 2021 will also bring Brexit, with whatever upheaval that may cause, and the Scottish Parliamentary elections. Coronavirus is likely to occupy our minds for a long time yet, but other crises also need our attention, and need the urgent attention of governments, ours and others; the refugee catastrophe; racism; destruction of human and wildlife habitats; species extinction; climate change – the list goes on. As with every year, the next year will also include significant events in people's lives. Already we have seen new challenges and new possibilities for churches. We have had a 'Zoom' service in Orphir/Stenness – thanks to all for their hard work in making it such a success.

As we turn our thoughts to the Lectionary readings for today, we see all the ups and downs reflected in a theme of the messiness that is ordinary, everyday human life, the life into which Jesus was born. We are reminded that God is with us, offering hope for the future. All of the readings tell of the fulfilment of God's promises, promises that, nevertheless, those came through a very human story. Paul sums it up:

God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children.

A very human story, but a story of the Son of God coming into a world when the time was right, born in the messiness of birth that required Mary to be ritually 'purified'.

Only in Luke's gospel do we find information about the life of Jesus between his birth and the beginning of his ministry. Luke places Jesus and his family squarely in the Temple, emphasising the devoutness of the parents and their observance of the Jewish Law. We remind ourselves that Jesus was a Jew. In later life he would be rejected by many people, but not because of his rejection of the Temple.

Today's reading begins and ends with the Law:

'When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord' (v. 22).

Then:

'When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth'.

We learn later that Mary and Joseph go to the Temple every year. A devout family, conforming to the requirements of the Law. Every Jewish boy had to undergo three ancient ceremonies. They were circumcised on the eighth day after birth. Then, because the first-born male was sacred to God, parents, in effect, had to buy him back from God by paying a sum of money. The third provision referred to ritual purification a woman who had given birth. If the child was a boy, the woman was 'unclean' for forty days; if a girl, for eighty days. At the end of that time, she had to bring a lamb and a pigeon as a sacrificial offering, but the Law laid down that if she could not afford a lamb, she could bring another pigeon. The offering of the two pigeons instead of a lamb and a pigeon was called *'The Offering of the Poor'*. That's what Mary brought.

All this is a long way of telling us that Mary and Joseph were devout, and that they were ordinary people, with no money to spare. These are the circumstances of Jesus's childhood, in which he *'grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favour of God was upon him'*.

The Jews regarded their nation as the Chosen People, destined, some day, to become masters of the world and lords of all the nations. To bring in that time, some believed that there would arise a great champion, a king of David's line. Some expected that God himself would break into human history by supernatural means. A few others, known as *'The Quiet in the Land'*, did not dream of violence and power, but believed in a life of constant prayer and quiet watchfulness until God should come. Simeon was one of these, and Anna was another. That's the background.

Here we have a human story, taking place among the realities of politics, religion and poverty. It's the story of a baby being blessed, a story that can be recognised by all people, and is meant for all people. Do you recognise the similarities in our society today? Maternity services, political leadership; disputes and wrangling; rich and poor, poverty and need; racism, homeless people, asylum-seekers, and all the rest – and made even more complicated by the Covid Pandemic.

Picture this new family coming to the Temple to present their baby. They have been through a lot; bewildered by the events leading up to the birth, confused and apprehensive about what was going to happen. An old man takes their baby in his arms, an old man who believed that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. Now he is ready to depart in peace, and the words he speaks over the child have come to be known as the *Nunc Dimittis*. one of the great hymns of the Church, words that summarise the work and the fate of Jesus.

Simeon tells Mary:

This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel.

Many will fall. A hard saying. Men and women are judged according to their reaction to Jesus Christ. Those who are unmoved, or hostile, are condemned. Many will rise: those who

respond in love to the goodness of Christ are within the Kingdom. It is the hand of Jesus that lifts men and women out of the old life and into the new.

Simeon prophesies that Jesus will meet with much opposition. We know how and to what extent that prophecy came true.

Notice too the last few words of Simeon's prediction;
*my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a **light for revelation to the Gentiles** and for glory to your people Israel.'*

Christmas is about light coming into the darkness of our individual lives, about our return from exile, about our inner peace – indeed, about the birth of Christ within us. Back in the 13th century, Meister Eckhart taught about Christmas as the birth of within us through the union of God's spirit with our flesh. We have the same thought in the words we sing every Christmastime (Hymn 304):
'O holy Child of Bethlehem be born in us today'.

We are meant to be changed by Advent and Christmas. Advent and Christmas are about a new world, a transformed world, a world without violence and injustice and oppression. How is that transformation to be brought about? Some people believe it can only happen through the direct intervention of God. We believe that have a part to play in God's plan.

St. Augustine said:

'God without us will not; we without God cannot'.

God will not change us as individuals without our participation. Nor will God change the world without our participation. Everybody has a part to play in God's plan. For some, it will be an active, public part. For others it may be a quiet part of prayerful support, away from publicity. Maybe for most people it will be a mixture of the two.

The last word: the words of the first of today's hymns combine the themes of Christmas and Advent in the political image of Jesus as Lord and King, the personal image of every heart making room for him, and the rejoicing of heaven and nature, the whole of creation:

Joy to the world, the Lord is come!

Let earth receive her King;

let every heart prepare him room,

and heaven and nature sing,

and heaven and nature sing,

and heaven, and heaven and nature sing.

Joy to the world - for God so loves the world.

Amen. Soli Deo Gloria.

(Offering) Hymn (4) 332 When Mary brought her treasure

Dedication

'We give thee but thine own,
whate'er the gift may be;
all that we have is thine alone,
a trust, O Lord, from thee.

And we believe thy Word,
though dim our faith may be;
whate'er for thine we do, O Lord,
we do it unto thee.' Amen.

Prayers of Intercession

Emmanuel, God with us,
among us, around us, within us,
you know your world, and you know us.
We open our hearts and minds to you, sharing our concerns,
and listening to your concerns, and your calls to act.

As we think of a baby laid in a manger,
we pray for all mothers and babies, and for those who support them,
in our own place,
and especially in places where there is poverty and need.

We think of a father learning a new role,
and we pray for all who live in uncertainty and look to new beginnings.

With Simeon and Anna,
we pray for all those who wait in hope or fear, for life or death.
We remember the many people suffering from Covid,
those who treat them, and nurse them, and loved ones who wait and worry.

With seekers and worshippers everywhere,
we pray for your Spirit to work in hearts, and minds, and faith communities.
Especially in these strange times, when our church buildings are seriously restricted,
we pray that your Church may discover and develop new ways of reaching out to the people.

With those who speak up against poverty, and discrimination and oppression,
we pray that your will may indeed be done,
and that your kingdom may come on earth.

With the poor and underprivileged
we pray for transformation of governments and systems,
and an end to exploitation.

With all of creation,
we pray for climate justice, and an awakening to our responsibilities,
that we may care for the world around us.
Send your Spirit to transform and guide us,
that your world may be changed in your ways.

In our own places and circumstances, we bring to you
all who are in special need;
those who are ill, or lonely, worried or afraid;
those who grieve.
Especially we pray people known to us for whom we have special concerns today:
Pause ...

We bring all our prayers in the name of Jesus Christ,
our Saviour and our Lord. Amen.

Closing Hymn(5) 286 Tell out my soul

Closing Words and Benediction

Into the new week, and towards a new year,
may we be
ready to see God at work in the world,

open to hope for God's ways in the world,
and holding God's love in our lives.

And the blessing of God,
loving Father, new-born Son, and living Spirit,
go with us, and with all those we are given to love,
this day, into 2021, 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.