

ORPHIR and STENNESS CHURCH
Handout for Sunday 30th. August 2020; Proper17A

Introduction:

In the present circumstances of the Coronavirus pandemic, while 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

Today we hear Peter protesting that the Messiah should not suffer, and getting a telling off for it.

Pause for a moment and know that, wherever we are at this time, God is here with us.

'In God alone is my soul at rest. He alone is my rock, my strength'.

There are lots of things on my mind as I try to pray, things bothering me, things I've got to do. For this short time, can I just put them on one side, and find a time of peace for my soul? A time of rest with my God, my rock, my strength? 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.

*Worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness;
bow down before him, his glory proclaim;
gold of obedience, and incense of lowliness
bring, and adore him; the Lord is his name.*

Let us worship God:

Hymn (1): 201 Worship the Lord in the Beauty of Holiness

Opening Prayer and Lord's Prayer

Wherever we are today, we remind ourselves that we are in the presence of the God who is, who always has been, the God who always will be; the faithful God, journeying God, God with us, God above and beyond us in mystery, yet beside us in every struggle, guiding us ever onwards.

We come in praise and in gratitude for his faithfulness. We call upon his name, as we worship his presence, for we are here, in our own surroundings, in places and times made holy by his presence.

We come, opening ourselves to his Spirit, and, trusting, in the love of his Son, Jesus Christ, we offer our lives and ourselves to God. In these uncertain times, as in all times, we come with expectations, and with fears, in faith, and in doubt, bringing our joys, and our sorrows; trusting that God will receive us, challenge us, protect us, and grant us his peace.

The faithfulness of our just and loving God echoes down the centuries,
yet we acknowledge that, too often,
our commitment is much less certain.
God invites us to follow in his way of love,
yet too often we look for excuses, and seek an easier path.
His concern is for justice and peace,
yet too often we ignore the cries of the oppressed.
We seek God's renewing grace to set us free from our past failings,
to refresh us, and to set us anew in his ways.

God calls each one of us by name; his words to us are joy and peace.

Praise be to him, now and always.

We bring all our prayers in the name of Jesus,

In whose 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): 159 Lord, for the years

Readings:

Romans 12:9-21 (NRSV): Marks of the True Christian

Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honour. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.' No, 'if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.' Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Contemporary Reading: Faith changes everything. Nothing is impossible.

From *Pastoral Prayers to Share, Year C*, by David Sparks.

In faith, we are willing to put grudges, envy, and resentments behind us.

In faith, our ability to use fresh talents and go in new directions becomes reality.

In faith, we find it possible to work joyfully as the member of a community.

In faith, we explore the world of the spirit open to new truth.

In faith, we face the end of life in hope without fear.

How much can we be changed for good?

With faith, there are no limits.

Hymn (3): 166 Lord of all hopefulness (T. Slane, 500?)

Gospel Reading: Matthew 16:21-28 (NRSV): Jesus Foretells His Death and Resurrection

From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, 'God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.' But he turned and said to Peter, 'Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling-block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.'

The Cross and Self-Denial

Then Jesus told his disciples, 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?

'For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done. Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.'

Message

Today's reading from Paul's Letter to the Romans picks up where we left off last week, and it seems to me very appropriate that the editors of the New Revised Standard version head this section 'Marks of the True Christian'. Someone has said that Chapter 12 of Romans is so great an ethical statement that it should always be considered alongside Jesus's Sermon on the Mount, which we find in Matthew Ch. 5.

As I mentioned last week, Paul had an ongoing problem in the early Christian community with Jewish Christians who insisted on rigid obedience to the Jewish Law and, in effect, were insisting that converts had to become Jews before they could become Christians. Paul has to keep reminding them – and us – that unity is possible even in diversity. Maybe we recognise the same prejudices and entrenched attitudes within the Christian church in our time too. We remind ourselves that we can all work together. From Chapter 12 onwards, Paul builds on all that he has already proclaimed about God's mercy and salvation, urging the Christian community to live in accordance with the Way of Jesus.

Central to Paul's faith is his insistence that salvation comes through the grace of God alone. We can't achieve salvation by our own efforts. We are justified by grace through faith. We are saved by grace, not by works. But – and here comes the crunch – that doesn't mean that we are not to try.

In Ephesians 2 we find:

*By grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God – not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for **good works**.* (Eph. 2: 8-10)

In the Letter of James we read: '*faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead*'. (James 2:17, NIV)

In other words, **we are saved by grace for works**. We are saved by the grace of a loving God who reaches out to us in love and forgiveness, beyond all that we could ever expect or deserve, but the down side is that we have to be equally concerned about the people around us who are having a bad time.

In today's reading, Paul moves from what he says we are not capable of doing to what he seems to think we are able to manage, and it is a bit scary.

Paul is not asking the Christian community for the dramatic, headline-grabbing virtues that we might expect, like heroism, or courage in battle. He directs them – us – to conduct that has to be practised every minute of every day, virtues that often go unnoticed, that often get us no praise at all: things like love, respect, patience, perseverance.

Paul knows quite well that these are very difficult skills to acquire. Reading between the lines in his letters you get the impression that he had problems with them too. Maybe that's why he uses dramatic language. Our love is to be completely sincere and unselfish: no play-acting, no hypocrisy, no ulterior motives, and we are to hate what is evil just as passionately. We are to compete with each other in being respectful to others, rather than concentrating on our own rights and privileges and prestige. We are to be zealous in service, with our spirit at boiling point. Maybe we will burn out, but we must not rust out. We are to be joyful in hope. Christians believe that "the best is yet to be". Somebody said that there are no hopeless situations in life: there are only men and women who have become hopeless about them. There should never be such a thing as a hopeless Christian. Do you see relevance here to our own situation as the pandemic continues?

We are to persevere in prayer. At any time, but especially at a time like this, it's easy to get out of the habit of prayer. If we do, we cut ourselves off from an infinite strength beyond our own. We are to share with those in need. In a world preoccupied with getting, Christians are to be intent on giving, and we are to extend hospitality even to strangers.

Paul warns his readers that they had better get used to the idea that they are not going to be beloved or admired for their goodness, because the better they are, the more Christian lives they lead, the more they will differ from everybody else, and the more they will be disliked and persecuted. They can't expect understanding, because nobody will want to listen to their explanations about why they live the way they do, and nobody else will know that they are in the right. They just have to put up with that. They must resist the temptation to try to tell the world, "we are right, and you are wrong". Harder still, when they are hurt and insulted and badly treated, there is never to be any question of getting their own back. They are not to repay evil with evil – not to retaliate in the same way. Christ on the cross prayed for those who were killing him. Stephen died praying for forgiveness for those who left their clothes in Paul's care while they stoned him to death.

We are to rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep. Somebody said that folks have to cry together before they are friends. It is much easier to weep with those who weep than it is to rejoice with those who rejoice. We have all known calamity and grief, and it is a hard heart indeed that does not share in a sorrow, but it can be very difficult to congratulate someone on good fortune without a tinge of envy, and particularly if the person's success involves disappointment to us.

We are to live in harmony with one another. We are to avoid pride and snobbishness. We are not to put on airs and graces. In times when slanderous allegations were being made against Christianity Paul reminds us that Christian conduct must not only be good and just and fair – it must be seen to be good and just and fair.

We are to live at peace with all. It is interesting that Paul adds two qualifications: he says *if it is possible*, and *as far as you can*. Paul had good reason to know that there are times when principle has to take precedence over easy-going courtesy, times when we have to stand up for what believe to be right, but he knows quite well that it is easier for some people to live at peace than others. We all know folk who, as the saying goes, could start a fight in an empty house.

We are not to take vengeance, because vengeance belongs not to us but to God. In the last analysis, no human has the right to judge another. That is God's prerogative. If we treat people with kindness rather than vengeance, we heap burning coals on their heads – meaning not that it

will store up punishment for them, but that we will move them to shame. If we meet hatred with hatred and evil with evil, we bring ourselves down to that level. Somebody said, 'I will not allow any man to make me lower myself by hating him'.

Paul lists all these desirable qualities, but he needs the Christian community to understand that they will not come by accident. We have to work at them with the same energy and dedication as we might use to getting on in the world, or doing well at sports. We have to be the change we would like to see in the world, rather than waiting for it to happen without us.

It all seems so very difficult, doesn't it? Discouraging, even, especially when we have other things, like Coronavirus, on our minds.

But we have it on very good authority that this is God's way. When Jesus came into the world, even the people he chose to be his closest friends didn't understand him. Just before the passage we read from Matthew, Peter makes his enormous confession to Jesus: "*You are the Messiah*", and Jesus blesses him. But now here is Peter telling Jesus off! "*No, no, Jesus, a messiah doesn't lose! A messiah wins, and everybody worships him!*"

We cannot know the tone of voice of Jesus's reply, whether he answered in anger, or in hurt and disappointment that this suggestion arose through misunderstanding by one who loved him, but the sharpness of Jesus's response, "*Get behind me, Satan*" shows us how much of a temptation it must have been for Jesus himself to take the easy way.

Maybe we think that, for Jesus, it was the natural, easy thing to choose God's way, but the Gospels show us that, just like us, Jesus had to make his choice for God, over and over again, day after day. It would have been easy for Jesus to be Peter's kind of messiah, but that would have been to perpetuate the cycle of violence and death as one domination system replaced another. God's way is to bring life, but it can only be done by Jesus' unprecedented use of his power.

Nobody can prevail by force all the time. God's way of life is the only real and lasting life that there is, and he wants to share it with us. At this stage in Matthew's story Peter had not got the point, but we know that he did later. Thanks to Peter and to succeeding generations of Christians, we have a community that can help us to imitate Jesus. In these uncertain and worrying times it is the more essential that we all work together – even if that means masks and social distancing; that we look out for one another, remembering people's good points rather than their failings, that we be ready and willing to reach out to people who are in any kind of need.

These few verses from Romans 12 are worth reading again – and again and again.

Amen. Soli Deo Gloria.

(Offering) Hymn (4) 402 Take up your cross, the Saviour said

Dedication of Offering:

Dear Lord,

All good gifts come from you.

From the riches we have received we make our offering. May it be used for the furtherance of your purposes in this place, and for the benefit of those in need. Amen.

Prayers of Intercession

Jesus, Emmanuel, God with us,
although separated in place and time
we gather as your body,

united with your people everywhere.
We open our hearts and our minds
to other places and other people,
and to your whole creation
in all its beauty and brokenness.

To a world where there is so much suffering,
where millions starve as others live in luxury,
where multitudes are denied so many of the things we take for granted,
where peoples rise in protest against oppressive regimes,
groan in oppression,
to all of these is added the world-wide reality of a major pandemic disease.
We pray for your suffering people everywhere.

**Lord in your love,
hear our prayer.**

As people cry out,
as more people are affected by Covid-19;
as land dries out and crops fail,
or floods wash away lives and homes and futures,
as people encounter natural disasters of all kinds and in many places,
as food and water and medical supplies become scarce,
open our eyes to see what is happening;
show us anything, however small, that we may do to help.
As neighbours and friends cry out,
in illness or suffering or sadness,
in worry or uncertainty;
where loss shakes the present,
and fear blocks the way ahead,
where death casts its shadow in the future,
open our hearts to know that you are with us all
and help us to reach out to one another as you reach out to us.

Loving God,
we bring those personal concerns which trouble us the most at this time:

Pause

Lord in your love, hear our prayer.

In Jesus' name we ask. Amen

Closing Hymn(5) 644 – Oh Jesus, I have promised

Closing Words and Benediction

We go into tomorrow as those who would share not only what the world is,
but what we can help make it be. May you find moments of laughter and bliss in the midst of
suffering and distress.
May you know the blessing of God, stay safe in the way of Christ, and may you be upheld by his
Spirit today 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.