

ORPHIR and STENNESS CHURCH
Service Handout Sunday 31.05.20; Pentecost A
Order of Service:

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

Today we celebrate the coming of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is present throughout creation and yet is also present inside each one of us. We celebrate the diversity of the Spirit, who spans the depths of the past, the immediacy of the present, and the dreams of the future; who encompasses the whole of creation yet lights the spark within each one of us.

In a moment of quietness, let us let go of the cares and the worries of the past week, and know the presence of God among us.

Pause

Great, Creator God, we gather in your presence.
Loving, risen Lord, we are drawn into your love.
Holy Spirit of peace, inspire and enrich our worship. 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.

Let us worship God:

Hymn (1): 132 Immortal, invisible

Opening Prayer and Lord's Prayer

Separated by place and by time,
yet remembering that we are united as the people of God,
we come quietly into the nearer presence
of the giver of every good and perfect gift,
bringing our worship and our praise,
bringing our gratitude for numberless blessings we have experienced in our lives.

We come in thanksgiving for the goodness and mercy that have followed us all our days,
and above all for the eternal Word made flesh
who came to live among us in the person of Jesus Christ.

In the face of the Covid-19 pandemic that sweeps across the world
we come to God, bringing also our fears and our apprehensions
for ourselves and for those we love.

We bring our doubts and our uncertainties,
acknowledging the times when we do not know what to do for the best,
and that we feel helpless to keep safe the people we most care about.

We come in regret, remembering also the things we wish we had not done;

times and opportunities forgotten, abused, avoided,
yet trusting in the love of God, shown in Jesus Christ,
and in the power of the Holy Spirit,
to set us once more in the right ways.

As today we remember with joy
the coming of the Spirit from the risen, ascended Christ,
coming upon all those gathered at that first Pentecost,
dispelling their fears, clearing their vision, uniting them as one,
and equipping them for mission,
may that same Spirit of Pentecost come among us,
and among all God's people today, wherever they may be,
bearing these same gifts of grace.

Despite the troubles around us,
may our hearts and lives be open to the life-giving wind of the Spirit,
that we may be inspired to live more faithfully as joyful witnesses to the good news of Jesus.

So may we be renewed and strengthened to meet the problems and difficulties and
challenges of the coming days and weeks,
trusting always in Jesus Christ, in whose name and 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): 194 This is the day

Readings:

Ps. 104:24-34 and 35b (NRSV)

O Lord, how manifold are your works!

In wisdom you have made them all; the earth is full of your creatures.
Yonder is the sea, great and wide, creeping things innumerable are there,
living things both small and great.
There go the ships, and Leviathan that you formed to sport in it.

These all look to you to give them their food in due season;
when you give to them, they gather it up;
when you open your hand, they are filled with good things.
When you hide your face, they are dismayed;
when you take away their breath, they die and return to their dust.
When you send forth your spirit, they are created;
and you renew the face of the ground.

May the glory of the Lord endure for ever;
may the Lord rejoice in his works—
who looks on the earth and it trembles,
who touches the mountains and they smoke.
I will sing to the Lord as long as I live; I will sing praise to my God while I have being.
May my meditation be pleasing to him, for I rejoice in the Lord.
35b Bless the Lord, O my soul. Praise the Lord!

Acts 2: 1-21 (NRSV):

The Coming of the Holy Spirit

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked, 'Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power.' All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, 'What does this mean?' But others sneered and said, 'They are filled with new wine.'

Peter Addresses the Crowd

But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them: 'Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning. No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:

"In the last days it will be, God declares,
that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh,
and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
and your young men shall see visions,
and your old men shall dream dreams.
Even upon my slaves, both men and women,
in those days I will pour out my Spirit;
and they shall prophesy.
And I will show portents in the heaven above
and signs on the earth below,
blood, and fire, and smoky mist.
The sun shall be turned to darkness
and the moon to blood,
before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day.
Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.

Contemporary reading

Michel Quoist, who died in 1997, was a French Catholic priest, and an inspirational figure to many Catholics and other Christians around the world. He sought to relate their faith more directly to everyday life by presenting Christianity as part of daily reality, rather than in the forms of traditional piety. This reading is taken from his book "Christ is Alive" which was published in 1970, before any considerations of gender-inclusive language.

If we believe in man's aspirations, in man's desire to better himself, to live more fully, to build a just and united world, then we believe in the Father who creates in love. And we believe in Jesus Christ the Saviour. And we also believe in the Holy Spirit. For the Holy Spirit also came down to earth. Christ had promised to send him:
"I shall ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate to be with you for ever, that Spirit of truth . . . you know him, because he is with you, he is in you."

And Christ kept his word.

The Holy Spirit is always with us. And the Scriptures tell us what his function is from all eternity. He was present at all of creation. He spoke through the prophets. He prepared Mary for the coming of the Saviour, and he "overshadowed" her on the day of the Event.

Today the Holy Spirit is still at work in the heart of man and of the world. He accompanies and guides man in the completion of creation. It is he who straightens what has been twisted. It is he who makes straight the way of the Saviour. He is present in all human aspirations, and he corrects in them what must be corrected. He directs them. He prepared the encounter between man and Christ within the framework of involvement in the realisation of what would otherwise remain merely a plan.

Hymn (3): 619 and 620 Spirit of the Living God

Gospel Reading: John 20:19-23 (NRSV)

Jesus Appears to the Disciples

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.' After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.' When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.'

Message:

This is Pentecost Sunday. Unless you come to church regularly you may not know about it. We all know about Christmas, and about Easter, but we may not notice Pentecost. Yet Pentecost is one of the great, watershed moments in Christian history, and accordingly deserves to be fully recognised. We often speak of Pentecost as '*the Birthday of the Church*'. In recent times, and in other countries, the charismatic movement flowing out of Pentecostalism has been a powerful reminder to the Church to give full place to the implications of Pentecost for its life, ministry and mission.

Pentecost: the Birthday of the Church, but different from other birthdays. This is the "spiritual birthday of the church." On this birthday we don't give a present: we receive a present - the gift of the Holy Spirit. That's what we remember today.

The book of Acts of the Apostles contains so many references to the Spirit that it could be called the Acts of the Holy Spirit. It is really a second instalment of Luke's Gospel, and is Luke's account of the origins of the Christian Church. Earlier in Acts, and earlier in the Gospel of John, we find Jesus's promise to his disciples that he will send them a helper in the form of the Holy Spirit, who comes from the Father, and who will reveal the truth about God.

Today's reading tells us about the fulfilment of that promise: the coming of the Spirit. Here is the vindication of the earthly ministry of Jesus - his death, resurrection and ascension to enthronement as true sovereign of the world, the one in whom heaven and earth meet.

Pentecost also looks forward to the day when our prayer, '*Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven*' will be fully answered through the Spirit-filled ministry of the whole people of God, and the fulfilment of the unity-in-diversity of God's people that is his plan for the entire world.

By the time Luke was writing the Book of Acts, about 80 – 90 AD, Christianity had already progressed from being an obscure minority sect to being one of the major forces in the Roman empire. The gospel really was spreading like wildfire.

None of us can know exactly what happened on that day of Pentecost so long ago. Nowadays we tend not to believe in the supernatural. We look for a logical or a scientific explanation, or we dismiss the stories as exaggerations, or like some of the onlookers, the effects of alcohol. Whatever happened, it was a momentous day for the early church, a day on which the Holy Spirit came upon the Christian Church. Not that this was the first coming of the Holy Spirit: the Holy Spirit had worked through all ages revealing the truth of God to ordinary men and women, but on that first Pentecost the Holy Spirit came in a very special way, and from that time on the Holy Spirit became the power behind the life of the Church.

Earlier in Acts (1:8) we find Jesus, immediately before his ascension, promising:
But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses to the ends of the earth.'

Here that promise is fulfilled:
"They were all filled with the Holy Spirit" (2:4)

The disciples are taken by surprise: they are not expecting anything like this. Even Luke, the scholar, has difficulty finding words to describe what happened: that sound "like a strong wind blowing" and the "tongues of fire." People "who had come from every country in the world" hear and understand.

Maybe the account has suffered in translation. Perhaps Luke did not mean that the disciples suddenly acquired the gift of speaking in *foreign* languages. After all, the people there that day didn't need foreign languages – a crowd like that needed only two languages – Aramaic, and the lingua franca, Greek – and most people could speak both. (Indeed, later on we find Paul referring to people in a state of ecstasy "speaking in tongues" and suggesting that it would be better if the message could be given in a language that could be understood.)

It doesn't matter. The important thing is that, by the power of the Spirit, this varied crowd of people were hearing the word of God in a way that they could immediately understand.

They hear about 'God's deeds of power' - the great things that God has done - and they are "amazed and perplexed." *'All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, 'What does this mean?'*

What it means is that the barriers of culture and language are broken down and that God is drawing to himself a new people, people 'from every nation under heaven'.

There are always people who, faced with something they don't understand, can only resort to ridicule. Some of those standing around the cross poked fun at the dying Christ. Some of those witnessing this great outpouring of the Spirit do the same. Full of new wine, they say. Nothing changes! Every day people ridicule Christians on account of their conversion experiences, or their religious beliefs.

Peter soon disposes of the idea that they are drunk. It is only nine o'clock in the morning. (Mind you, a while back in Kirkwall, about 0900, I met a man I know slightly. He was, as they say, 'seriously refreshed'. But that's another story.)

What is happening is hugely significant: it is the fulfilment of Joel's great prophecy that God will pour out his Spirit "in the last days" – and this will be a sign of the coming of the 'the Lord's great and glorious day'.

Peter is saying that the great Day that they had dreamed of for generations had now come, but in a way very different from what they had expected, a way that made all the old ideas redundant. God had arrived in human history in the person of Jesus Christ.

The coming of the Spirit is the sign of a vitally important moment in the history of the people of God: 'Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved'.

Salvation is now available to all!

The immediate results of that Day of Pentecost?

Chapter 1:15 tells us that there were about 120 believers. By the evening of that same day, as 2:41 tells us, a further 3000 were added to their numbers.

OK, you say, so what? What does it all mean for us here in Orphir/Stenness -in Orkney – in the world – in 2020, and in the middle of a serious pandemic?

I think that the implications here and now are just as great as they were on that day.

I think that never was there a greater need for the Spirit. So many people seem to have lost their way. They long for a sense of awe and mystery, for sacredness; for spirituality, for enchantment - for something 'more' than the purely rational and intellectual. They know they have lost something, but they don't know what it is they have lost.

They have lost the Spirit.

I may have already told you about going into a big bookshop looking for a particular book on Christian theology. I couldn't find the right department. I asked an assistant where I could find Bibles. She didn't know. She had to ask a colleague. Eventually I was directed to a small shelf with a few Christian books. Yet there was a whole department - rows of shelves entitled "**Mind, Body and Spirit.**"

A few days ago I entered "Mind, Body and Spirit." into the Amazon and got over 90,000 titles.

The people out there – maybe in here as well – are looking for something. But they are looking on the wrong shelf.

Who, or what is this Spirit? My dictionary defines "spirit" as:
"the force or principle of life that animates the body of living things."

In other words - it is what makes us come alive.

In the Old Testament the Hebrew word *ruach* could be translated 'spirit,' or 'breath,' or 'wind,' depending on the context. The same applies to the Greek word *pneuma*, which is used 68 times in the book of Acts. Jesus *breathed* on his disciples and gave them the Holy Spirit.

For Christians, The Holy Spirit is the third person of the Trinity. A manifestation of God. Jesus tells us that the Spirit, our advocate, our Helper, who reveals the truth about God, will come, and will lead us into all truth.

Sometimes the Spirit is the overpowering force of the rushing mighty wind, the strong wind blowing – and we know all about wind in Orkney. At other times it works quietly and gently – the 'still, small voice' (1 Kings 19:12) – the 'sound of sheer silence' within us, almost unnoticed, increasing our faith, our confidence, our self-esteem, and helping us to become all that God wants us to be. How badly do we need it now!

We all believe that we received the Holy Spirit through our baptism, our confirmation, and perhaps at other significant times in our Christian life. Is it still there? Does it make any

difference? Or has it lost its edge? Or has the Spirit become submerged in our everyday worries and problems? Do we need spiritual renewal? If we do, we are not alone. We are in very good company. Think of Jesus himself. He knew the tiredness of overwork, the stress of frustration, and antagonism, and rejection. Time and again he needed to recharge his spiritual batteries, and he did that by communion with the Father in prayer. Jesus himself could not do without the renewal of the Spirit. Neither can we.

Maybe we have become set in our ways. Maybe we've got away from expecting fresh visitations of the Spirit. Or maybe we just need to listen more intently and look a bit more carefully, for I am sure it is still there for all of us. Maybe it needs a Coronavirus pandemic to make us take a fresh look at things.

It seems to me that I heard afresh the rush of that violent wind a few years ago, and that a tongue of fire has given a new spark to my life, so that I know what I will be doing with whatever time is left to me.

What about you?

Can you hear the rush of that violent wind? Can you see any tongues of fire?
Are there any voices in your ears? How do you respond?

Don't tell me. Tell God.

Amen. SDG.

(Offering) Hymn (4) 600 Spirit of God unseen as the wind

Dedication

O God, as we offer this money for the work of your church,
may we open ourselves to the vision of your Spirit, so that,
in being and becoming all that you have created us to be
we may learn to love as you do. Amen

Prayers of Intercession

Come, Holy Spirit, restless breath of love,
breathe on us now and help us to pray as we ought.
Come, Holy Spirit, come.
Come, Holy Spirit, to your world today.

Almighty God,
as in the beginning you brought order out of chaos,
look upon the chaos we have created in today's world,
so that, by your Spirit, people everywhere
may learn the way of life you intend for us all,
and find purpose, meaning and hope in their existence.

Where there is oppression and abuse of others, bring your justice.
Where there is anxiety and fear, bring your peace.
Where there is hatred and division, bring your love.

Where the resources of the world are exploited,
and all peoples fail in our calling as trustees of land and sea,
grant us humility and grace to learn better ways.
Guide the rulers of the world in ways of justice and integrity, of truth and peace.

Come, Holy Spirit, come.

Come, Holy Spirit, especially at this time,
when the places where we would normally meet are not available to us,
remind us that your Church is people, not buildings.

As the Covid pandemic obliges us to gather in our separate places,
or to share in worship through internet connections,
assure us that nothing in all the world, not even Coronavirus,
can separate us from your love in Christ Jesus.

Breathe into your Church today new life and new zeal, new delight in the gospel.
Set our hearts on fire with your love as you did that first Pentecost in Jerusalem;
in all our diversity make us one in truth and love.
Inspire us to use our gifts in the service of all,
and empower and equip us, so that,
by the way we live and speak and serve, by all we do,
we may bear compelling witness to the universal lordship of Jesus Christ,
so that many will come to know Him for themselves.

Come, Holy Spirit, come.

Come, Holy Spirit,
come to all who need Your presence today.
Strengthen all who are in any way affected by Covid-19.
Send your healing power to those seriously ill;
give skill and compassion to doctors and nurses and all who care for them.
Guide scientists working to develop medicines and vaccines;
give wisdom to those who must decide on policy, and to all
who work to manage and control this disease.

Spirit of comfort and peace,
be very close to all who succumb to the disease, especially while separated from families,
and speak calm to troubled hearts and minds.
Spirit of life and light,
lift from despair those for whom the pandemic has brought loss of loved ones,
loss of employment and income, loss of hopes and expectations for the future.
Shine the Christ-light into their darkness.

Come, Holy Spirit, come.

Come, Holy Spirit,
help us to keep faith as we struggle with the patterns of life forced upon us
throughout these worrying times.
Revive your people, and equip us all for those tasks to which your church in every age and
every place is called.

So may it be that, arising from this pandemic,
your Church may go forward with new life, new hope, new vision,
acting more closely together in the rich diversity of the one body of Christ.

So may glory be given to You,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit, one God,
for ever and ever. Amen.

Closing Hymn(5) 595 (Tune: St Clement 220) O breath of life, come sweeping through us

Closing Words and Benediction

Come, Holy Spirit, fill our homes with peace.

Come, Holy Spirit, fill our hearts with love.

Come, Holy Spirit, fill our lives with your power.

Now 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.