

## **St Magnus Cathedral, Kirkwall**

[www.stmagnus.org](http://www.stmagnus.org)

Scottish Charity SCO 05322/CCL No 119086

[www.facebook.com/StMagnusCathedralCongregation](https://www.facebook.com/StMagnusCathedralCongregation)

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Welcome to St Magnus Cathedral this morning. It was founded in 1137 by St Rognvald, in honour of Magnus, his uncle. The Cathedral belongs to the people of Orkney and its doors are open to all. If you are a visitor, we hope this order of service will help you feel part of our worship together.

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You can find our Sunday worship here.

<https://www.facebook.com/StMagnusCathedralCongregation/>

or on YouTube here.

<https://youtu.be/E1hZlqCoKQM>

Join our Wednesday ZOOM meditation by signing up here.

[stmagnuszoom@gmail.com](mailto:stmagnuszoom@gmail.com)

Candle Lighting and opening meditation

We light this candle for all God's messengers, preparing the way for change, signs pointing to a new age to come.

A candle burns, the third marker of our Advent journey.

As we continue, may we travel expectantly.

As we continue,

may we know that the God within, guides our footsteps.

When we believe it is enough that we have sung in choirs, may we be reminded that it is the lullabies to little children, the acceptance sung to teenagers, the welcoming

songs to strangers, the oldies hummed with older folks that matter the most.

When we believe it is enough to have been in church every week, may we be reminded that it is the kindness we share on Monday, the justice we work for on Tuesday the wise words we offer on Wednesday, the meals we serve on Thursday, the blood we donate on Friday, the lifts we give on Saturday, the grace we live every day that matter the most.

When we believe it is enough to have taught Sunday School for so many years, may we be reminded that it is the words of forgiveness we offer, the books we open for children, the skills we share without recompense, the arms we open to others that matter the most.

### Reading

#### Luke 3:7-18

Crowds of people came out to be baptised, but John said to them, "You bunch of snakes! Who warned you to run from the coming judgment? Do something to show that you really have given up your sins. Don't start saying that you belong to Abraham's family. God can turn these stones into children for Abraham. An axe is ready to cut the trees down at their roots. Any tree that doesn't produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into a fire."

The crowds asked John, "What should we do?"

John told them, "If you have two coats, give one to someone who doesn't have any. If you have food, share it with someone else."

When tax collectors came to be baptized, they asked John, "Teacher, what should we do?"

John told them, "Don't make people pay more than they owe."

Some soldiers asked him, "And what about us? What do we have to do?"

John told them, "Don't force people to pay money to make you leave them alone. Be satisfied with your pay."

Everyone became excited and wondered, "Could John be the Messiah?"

John said, "I am just baptising with water. But someone more powerful is going to come, and I am not good enough even to untie his sandals. He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His threshing fork is in his hand, and he is ready to separate the wheat from the husks. He will store the wheat in his barn and burn the husks with a fire that never goes out."

In many different ways John preached the good news to the people.

### Reflection

How do we as followers of Jesus, set in our own time and place in the long history of the faith, and as a lead up to Christmas, focus on resisting the obsession of a

sentimental Christmas.

Sentimentalism wallows in feeling at the expense of truth and its companion, justice. Cultural philosopher Bell Hooks tells us that “the heart of justice is truth telling.” This means when lies or denial dominate, injustice follows, Justice is absent when Truth is absent.

Scientist Erich Jantsch, in his book *The Self-Organizing Universe*, calls God “the mind of the universe” and proposes that previously in the Middle Ages mystics wrote what he is now saying as a scientist and now that a scientist is saying it more people will hear the news. Science gives a kind of housekeeping seal of approval on lots of ideas in our culture these days.

In the Christmas story of “incarnation” God is not just the mind of the universe in the sense of a disembodied mind—rather **God is an embodied mind**. That is what “incarnation” means—taking on flesh. Mind in the premodern consciousness includes creativity and sensual in-put. God’s mind includes heart and caring. Mind is more than a functional notion of brain and rationality. Indeed recent studies are keen to differentiate between the ‘brain’ and the ‘mind’, while the tendency has been just to use the two words interchangeably. There’s a lot more to it seemingly...

Seeking truth and justice are the medicine for sentimentalizing which is the very opposite of justice and of truth. It is living in a doll-like world of pure sentiment, make-believe, oblivious of injustice— stale political consciousness is one writer’s definition of sentimentalism. It seems to be quite alive and well in the current political scene.

Carl Jung teaches another truth about sentimentalism, that sentimentalism and violence are convex and concave of the same reality. Sentimentalism can easily be a cover for violence. I felt this as I watched some of the news from the USA when Republican congressmen fumed and shouted at the Impeachment hearings of Donald Trump.

This sentimentalizing of culture helps explain I think the appalling flight from truth that flows from many of our elected politicians today. Sloganising and populist pandering to British exceptionalism for example. A disinterest in truth is manifest whether ignoring scientific facts about climate change or about lobbying and second jobs for MP’s. Or worse... some of the disgraceful utterances and potential legislation around refugees and asylum seekers in small boats in the Channel.

Denial is a choice. Thomas Aquinas said it is a mortal sin—meaning a deadly virus to one’s own soul and to one’s community—to refuse to know something important that one ought to know.

Sociologist Anne Douglas points out that science becomes a victim in sentimentalism because “the death of the critical instinct” plays a dominant role. Sentimentalism

reigns because for example, advertising becomes “the only faith of a secularised consumer society” and advertising was deliberately directed primarily to women in its genesis in the nineteenth century. In this way, she says, “the feminine occupation of shopping would constitute the dream-life of the nation.”

Or to give another example. In the *Ladies Magazine* of 1830 we read about what constitutes a proper female: “See, she sits, she walks, she speaks, she looks— unutterable things! Inspiration springs up in her very paths—it follows her foot-steps. A halo of glory encircles her and illumines her whole orbit. With her, man not only feels safe but is actually renovated.” It all sounds strikingly similar to an advert for a doll.

The Scriptures are presented in a sentimental way. For example the biblical creation story is preferred over Darwin’s story because the Garden of Eden story, we are told, is so “pretty and poetical, and is in the dear old Book that is so sweet and comfortable to us.”

Trainee ministers for long enough have gone through theological college learning biblical criticism of the historical-critical variety. But so often we also got the message that we shouldn’t talk about it with our people because it might hurt their faith. We might have heard something like, “Don’t take away something without replacing it.” Whatever that means. Or we heard, “Just tell them the story and they can come to terms with it by themselves. You’ll please everyone that way.”

Come on.... I think people deserve to be treated like adults. They deserve to know where we stand and how we understand the texts about which we teach and preach. I am not saying that there are not valuable nuances in legendary material and I certainly enjoy Christmas carols as much as the next person.

In contrast to sentimentalism about Christmas, consider Thomas Aquinas’ teaching that pertains to the deeper meaning of Christmas. “Through the Incarnation we are led to enjoy goodness perfectly. A call to explore the goodness of creation and the Way of Christ. ”

### Prayer

May the Spirit of God who breaks into our habitual sadness with astonishing good news; the Spirit God who disturbs our comfortable religious routines by turning out, against all the odds, to be a real presence, we give thanks with all for whom this Advent season is a time of genuine hopefulness and joy: those who look forward to spending time with family whom they love; to holding a child or a grandchild in their arms; to sharing good food in the company of good friends; to singing Christmas carols with gusto and conviction.

But we would be fooling no-one, if we tried to pretend that the only tidings in this season were ones of comfort and joy.

We pray for those who have no family with whom to gather; and whose loneliness is all the more acute because of the myths that the church helps to perpetuate. We pray for those who have lost a child, or never had one, despite their fervent prayers; and who quietly avoid church at this time of year, and whose absence may not be noticed.

And for ourselves, floundering sometimes in the gulf between the lovely old stories and the harsh realities of life. May we work to rediscover the true word of life that was spoken into just such a world as ours; the good news that meets us where we are, in our barrenness and despair, and enables us to start hoping and living again.

The vulnerable God is incarnate wherever new life appears, and we dream of a world where every child has an equal chance of reaching his or her full potential; where the question, "What will this child become?" is asked with curiosity and excitement, not with fear.

May we hear again the angel's message, and especially that kindly reassurance, "Do not be afraid!" The God within knows what it is that we most fear, and what we most hope for. May our hopes be fulfilled and our fears banished in ways that we never imagined possible, and may life-giving joy be implanted in us and grow and flourish, for the blessing of all.

### Blessing

**Now is the season of the year, in which we celebrate  
The birth of one who taught that love has power to cast out hate,  
Who through his life gave all of us example, good and great.  
O tidings of comfort and joy**

May you stay safe in the Way of Christ, and may you be blessed by his Spirit this day  
and always.