

## **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)

Minister: Rev Fraser Macnaughton Tel: 873312  
**[FMacnaughton@churchofscotland.org.uk](mailto:FMacnaughton@churchofscotland.org.uk)**  
Pastoral Minister: Rev. June Freeth Tel: 721449  
**[JFreeth@churchofscotland.org.uk](mailto:JFreeth@churchofscotland.org.uk)**

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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/T1-eqcbf9KA>

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 as a symbol of the spark of life which abides within us and around us.**

**May it be as a light in a dark night, a light in a window that welcomes the weary traveller home.**

We are drawn together by grace and compassion. In the light of all we seek to discover, and the knowledge of everything we cannot yet explain, may we grow in trust and love for one another - as our differences enhance our relationships and our mutual understanding becomes our prayer. May the strength of

our bond and the empathy we share mean the causes of justice and peace are served and the glories of creation and science are deeply valued and protected.

May it be so - through grace and compassion, may it be so.

### Reading

#### **2 Corinthians 9:6-11**

Keep this in mind: if you plant sparingly, you will reap sparingly, and if you plant bountifully, you will reap bountifully. You must give according to what you have inwardly decided—not sadly, not reluctantly, for God loves a giver who gives cheerfully. There are no limits to the grace of God, who will make sure you will always have enough of everything and even a surplus for good works, as scripture says: "God scattered abroad and gave to poor people;

God's justice endures forever." The One who provides seed for the planter and bread for food will also supply and enlarge your store of seed and increase your harvest of justice. You will be made rich in every way for your generosity, for which we give thanks to God.

### Reflection

A small boy, whose teacher asked him what he was painting, replied, "God." "Nobody knows what God looks like," said the teacher. "They will, when I'm finished," the boy responded earnestly. Many who chuckle at that tale just as earnestly present their picture of God and think they've captured the divine essence. They tell us God's thoughts, future plans, and the process of salvation for each individual. Reducing an infinite God who forms and sustains a world teeming with a huge variety of creatures, including billions of humans with unique personalities, diverse skills and a vast range of life experiences, set in an immense universe, down to a size and character they can comprehend and who thinks like they do. They've forgotten "My ways are not your ways, neither are my thoughts your thoughts", and Augustine's warning - "If you understand, it isn't God." There's meant to be mystery - "I am what I am; I will be whatever I will be." Those who think they have all the answers haven't found half the questions! The God they define so closely is too small and often too exclusive.

Now there are certain well-worn statements by way of objection to this view. One is

"It is all revealed to us in Scripture."

Certainly; but in the Bible we see a developing understanding from Abraham's mountain-top God, and Moses' jealous tribal God who participated in battles and demanded strict adherence to rules. Prophets brought new insights: Amos' God preferred justice to sacrifices; the love of Hosea's God is too strong to ever to give up on the people. We have the Father God Jesus taught to his disciples, while in Revelation we find a God of reward and punishment and renewal. We form our personal biblical picture by selecting from this array. We read scripture through the lenses of what we've been taught, personal experience, and the insights God gives us. Some pre-scientific images in the Bible present a God who's difficult for many in the 21st century to accept.

Another is "Jesus is the perfect revelation of God."

Indeed - but which Jesus? The Jesus surrendering himself to death on the cross to bring freedom, or the one returning in glory to impose his will onto the world? The Jesus refusing to condemn the adulteress, or the one judging the whole of humanity? The homeless preacher sweating blood in Gethsemane, or the Son of God enthroned in heaven? The Jesus challenging you to action or the one in whose arms you rest when things get tough? The Jesus reaching out to sinners and the 'unclean' on the margins of society, or the one condemning those without the right beliefs? (A Jesus who is beyond time and space may be all of these at the same time, but we tend to focus on the image we like or the one we need at the time.) Jesus himself was far more concerned with faith expressed in relationships and in action than with definitions, with commitment and compassion rather than catechisms.

Though the boy in my story is confident in his portrayal of God, he wouldn't be fazed if other children produced different pictures of God. Children cope happily with that; it's adults who want to impose their perceptions onto others. We lack children's openness, and their sense of wonder, and so we see "a dim reflection in a mirror". Perhaps that's why we're told to be like children in our approach to God - they trust without expecting to have all the answers, and they happily amend their ideas as they broaden their understanding. Then we might see faith as a journey of exploration into God rather than a set of beliefs, as an adventure and

a challenge rather than a refuge from harm or a ticket into heaven, as freedom from our past and freedom to become the people we are called to be. If we are to encourage people to embrace that freedom and develop their own relationship with God, we must open up opportunities for them that suit their gifts and temperaments.

If we have too fixed an idea of God we won't recognize God's presence in the unexpected. If our image is the King of Kings, we may not recognize him in a gardener, in someone who joins us on a journey, or a stranger on the shore. If we define God too closely, we may create barriers for others, restrict their potential and make it difficult for our children and grandchildren to recognize God in situations they'll face in an unknown future.

Jesus didn't say, "Learn these facts about God"; he declared, "Follow me." The disciples did follow - with all their doubts and questions, and their struggling to understand. That's what we're called to do - to follow Jesus, not merely "believe in him," not merely "accept him," not merely "worship him," but follow him. Follow him through our doubts and questions and struggles to understand. Follow him into an unfamiliar future. Following implies that we're not yet where we need to be. We must keep developing our faith - ask questions, share experiences, learn from one another; and encourage and care for each other. As we reflect him in our lives more and more, so we will gain greater insights into his nature and into God's love.

### Prayer

We lift up now all those of whom we are mindful. We affirm the power of praying

For people who are afraid of dying, and those who are afraid of living. For sufferers who wait to be admitted to hospital, and those who long to be discharged.

For the lonely who need friends, and the busy who feel constricted by too many. For children who are blithe and carefree, and those who are timid and anxious.

For folk who care deeply about others, and those who think only of themselves. For the wronged who show mercy and forgiveness and those who plot a fierce revenge.

For seekers who are keen to find faith, and the proud who wish to avoid it. For the churches where we feel at home, and others that seem strange or offputting.

For dear friends in this congregation, and those who often rub us the wrong way.

We would continue our presence here with confidence, in wonder and with gratitude - to be part of a tradition that frees us to love, include, heal and celebrate.

### Blessing

If we can stay aware when our lives are changing, secrets will be revealed  
to us

secrets about ourselves, about the nature of life, and about the eternal source of happiness and peace that is always available, always renewable, already within us.

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