

St Magnus Cathedral, Kirkwall

www.stmagnus.org

Scottish Charity SCO 05322/CCL No 119086

www.facebook.com/StMagnusCathedralCongregation

Minister: Rev Fraser Macnaughton Tel: 873312
FMacnaughton@churchofscotland.org.uk
Pastoral Minister: Rev. June Freeth Tel: 721449
JFreeth@churchofscotland.org.uk

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.

You can find our Sunday worship here.

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

or on YouTube here.

<https://youtu.be/TIasqz7ntjc>

Join our Wednesday ZOOM meditation by signing up here.

stmagnuszoom@gmail.com

Candle Lighting and opening meditation

All creation holds its breath.

The time is almost here.

The heavenly choir of angels waits for its cue to sing.

Excitement is all around us.

We prepare our hearts-The grace of God takes on human form.

Good news! Emmanuel, God-with-Us, comes to us.

We gather to make ready our hearts

for the coming of Christ, our hope.

As this season of "sparkle and bright" unfolds around us the transforming wonders of joy await discovery like shimmering sugar crystals on a favourite treat.

May we create joy in all our surroundings as we share gifts, meals, and simple pleasures with family and friends. May the easy gift of a smile bring the power of joy's touch to those we meet through these busy days. And may we experience the joy of this season as though with the eyes and hearts of children that we might be transfixed by power of what could be.

May Joy light the world this Christmas.

Reading Matthew 2: 1-11

While John was in prison, he heard about the works the Messiah was performing, and sent a message by way of his disciples to ask Jesus, "Are you 'The One who is to come' or do we look for another?" In reply, Jesus said to them, "Go back and report to John what you hear and see: 'Those who are blind recover their sight; those who cannot walk are able to walk; those with leprosy are cured; those who are deaf hear; the dead are raised to life; and the anawim—the "have-nots"—have the Good News preached to them.' "Blessed is the one who finds no stumbling block in me." As the messengers set off, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: "What did you go out to the wasteland to see—a reed swaying in the wind? Tell me, what did you go out to see—someone luxuriously dressed? No, those who dress luxuriously are to be found in royal palaces. So what did you go out to see—a prophet? Yes, a prophet—and more than a prophet! It is about John that scripture says, 'I send my messenger ahead of you to prepare your way before you.' "The truth is, history has not known a person born of woman who is greater than John the Baptizer. Yet the least born into the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

Reflection

Today is the second last Sunday before Christmas. I can confidently predict that every Christian congregation -- and possibly those of other religions too -- in the next couple of weeks will hear a sermon about the birth of Jesus.

I can also predict some of the themes of those sermons.

Some will use Mary's status to urge people to do something about poverty. Or about justice. Or perhaps about historic discrimination against women. The Christmas story becomes a means of getting at a social issue.

Others will use a series of carefully selected Bible verses to prove, beyond any doubt, that God Almighty became a helpless crying baby. And/or that biblical prophets knew all the details of an obscure birth that would take place 500 years later.

And therefore, by extension, that every other word in the Holy Book must also be 100% accurate.

A friend and retired preacher calls all of this "head stuff." It's wonderful material to argue about. But it makes no difference at all to how you drive on the road. Or how you treat the check-out assistant at the supermarket.

I contend, rather, that Christmas is about having a Small Furry Mammal brain.

To explain that, I need to invoke the theories of an ordained minister, psychologist, and environmental advocate, Michael Dowd.

Our brains have evolved, Dowd says. And you can trace that evolution in our brains themselves.

The earliest life forms -- such as a single-cell amoeba -- didn't need a brain at all.

But when the first vertebrates crawled out of the sea onto dry land, they needed some kind of brain to coordinate their fins, or legs, or whatever they crawled with.

That primitive and rudimentary brain still perches on top of our spinal cord, where it can instantly access muscle reactions to danger. It has only two programmes -- Fight and Flight. (Some biologists add additional F-words -- Freeze, Feed, and Fornicate.)

That's why you should not try to pet an alligator.

Dowd calls this our "Lizard" brain. Every human has one. Some individuals -- I won't name them -- operate almost entirely out of Lizard brain.

The next stage of mental development, Dowd calls the "Small Furry Mammal" brain. Because all mammals nurture their young. Some do

it longer, and maybe better, than others. But all new-born mammals need nourishment and cuddling from their mothers.

As brains evolved, they added a "Monkey Mind" -- those undisciplined synapses that leap from idea to idea, entranced by anything new and shiny.

And finally, the brain develops a prefrontal cortex -- the big lobe, right behind your forehead, that handles executive functions. It thinks things through. It considers alternatives, controls impulses, applies values.

Dowd punningly calls the prefrontal cortex our "Higher Porpoise" brain. Only the most intelligent mammals have it. It takes time to mature. Teenagers are still developing it, which is why so many teenagers tragically die doing irrational things like diving off cliffs or driving dangerously.

Stress -- emotional, physical, or chemical -- sends our brains backwards. When students panic during exams, they shut down their rational brain and shift into Monkey Mind, unable to focus. Similarly, alcohol tranquilizes the Higher Porpoise, which explains why drunk people do stupid things.

Fear instantly activates the Lizard brain's irrational Fight or Flight responses -- unless the Higher Porpoise can intervene in time.

Christmas, I contend, takes us back to our Small Furry Mammal brain. Christmas incarnates our desire to be loved. To be needed. To be valued.

Whether we believe those nativity stories or not, they touch one of our most basic needs -- to belong.

Especially during the long dark nights of winter.

That's why we gather together. In families, in congregations, in community organisations. We may not even like some of the people in our clubs, our workplaces, our churches. But we desperately want to belong. Not to be alone.

So we celebrate noisily at office parties and quietly at worship services. We hold family reunions. We radiate good cheer around dinner tables. We hear a story as familiar as a bar of Dairy Milk. And we feel comforted.

Not because it supports causes we believe in. Nor because it can be proved by biblical palaeontology.

Rather, because it reaches way back into the second-oldest root of our brains. The Lizard brain reacts only to threat. The Small Furry Mammal brain reacts to love. To caring.

So we rehearse and recall the story of a lonely young girl giving birth in a stable. And like the wondering shepherds, we gather around her, and welcome her baby.

And we feel that we too belong.

Prayer

In this Advent may we live in the promise of a desert coming into bloom. Where the dry land of our politics regrows a politics of hope that speaks into the lives of the least, that deserts of hopelessness and powerlessness are broken open in a field of new life, of community that seeks the best for one another.

So may the weakest of hands find new strength, those on their knees, a new confidence, those who fear for life, a new empowerment, to live more strongly, to live without fear and seek a world, and a community that makes it possible. So may we live compassionately believing the eyes of the blind shall be opened

and speak justly that the ears of the deaf may hear and the lame leap with new hope in life and those who have been silenced speak nonstop about justice;

so that waters of peace pour into the driest lands and the heat of the world cools in a new way of living together .

May we seek to build a highway that moves us and leads us from conflict to peace, from selfishness to compassion for one another, from power to sharing.

May we walk it, be companions along it, share the journey and find him there:

one of us, among us, Emmanuel.

Blessing

We go in hope for it is the dominant story still;
people of the incarnation with a word of truth;
companions of Christ through the pathways of the world;
peacemakers and travellers in the kingdom of love.

May you stay safe in the Way of Christ,

and may you be blessed by his Spirit this day and always.

