

St Magnus Cathedral, Kirkwall

www.stmagnus.org

Scottish Charity SCO 05322/CCL No 119086

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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.

You can find our Sunday worship here.

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

or on YouTube here.

<https://youtu.be/13GHnidj8js>

Join our Wednesday ZOOM meditation by signing up here.

stmagnuszoom@gmail.com

Candle Lighting and opening meditation

In lighting these candles we declare our intention to live
as if the greatest gift in the world
were about to be placed into our hands
and as if the Giver has understood
our deepest needs, our most heartfelt prayers

Step into the dawn. Cut the cord. Pull the plug. Break the chains
that tie and bind. Walk free like Nelson Mandela released from prison
into the possibility of a new path where enemies are surprised by grace.

Life, in its misery and delight, has led us here. All is learning.
Let go the past. Awaken to signs and wonders. Become aware of wise
guides and rock cairns pointing and reassuring the way.
Find our Anam Cara, our soul friend, our Caol Ait, our thin place
the people and places who feed our soul. Hold them close.
Recognize the hope of resurrection in each new day. Begin again and go
forth into life yet un-lived. Make peace, be pure of spirit, walk humbly,
love mercy and kindness, and do the good we know to do.
See with new eyes the path that has always been, that leads to where we
belong - that leads us home.

Reading

Matthew 2; 13-21

After the astrologers had left, the angel of God suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph with the command, "Get up, take the child and his mother and flee to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you otherwise. Herod is searching for the child to destroy him." Joseph got up, awakened Jesus and Mary, and they left that night for Egypt. They stayed there until the death of Herod, to fulfil what God had said through the prophet: "Out of Egypt I have called my Own." Herod became furious when he realized that the astrologers had outwitted him. He gave orders to kill all male children that were two years old and younger, living in and around Bethlehem. The age of the children was based on the date Herod had learned from the astrologers. Then what was spoken through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled: "A voice was heard in Ramah sobbing and lamenting loudly: it was Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, for they were no more." After Herod's death, the angel of God appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt with the command, "Get up, take the child and his mother, and set out for the land of Israel. Those who had designs on the life of the child are dead." Joseph got up, awakened Jesus and Mary, and they returned to the land of Israel.

Reflection

This is a tough Sunday to preach, coming after the Christmas celebrations of this week. The Gospel reading is the slaughter of the children under King Herod. Can you imagine anything less consistent with the "good cheer" of Christmas Day?

But perhaps this is a good thing. Perhaps we need to be reminded that great joy and great suffering exist right beside each other. Perhaps we need to be reminded that even as we celebrate, others grieve, and our celebration is empty and destructive unless we also work to create a reason for the least and most vulnerable among us to celebrate. Perhaps it's good for us to go directly from "Peace on earth and good will to

humanity" to the reality of violence, destruction and suffering, so that we can renew our commitment to the Christmas message in the light of the pain of our world, rather than in some celebratory vacuum.

It is this change in consciousness that encourages me. Granted, racial hatred and sex discrimination are still with us, war and violence still poison our culture, we have a large underclass of poor, desperate people, and there is a hard core of the population content with the way things are, afraid of change.

But if we see only that, we have lost historical perspective, and then it is as if we were born yesterday and we know only the depressing stories in this morning's newspapers, this evening's television reports.

Consider the remarkable transformation, in just a few decades, in people's consciousness of racism, in the bold presence of women demanding their rightful place, in a growing public awareness that homosexuals are not curiosities but sensible human beings, in the long-term growing scepticism about military intervention despite brief surges of military madness.

It is that long-term change that I think we must see if we are not to lose hope. Pessimism becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy; it reproduces itself by crippling our willingness to act. And I acknowledge too that our media saturated world, of 24 hours news and online access gives a skewed view of reality.

There is a tendency to think that what we see in the present moment will continue. We forget how often in this century we have been astonished by the sudden crumbling of institutions, by extraordinary changes in people's thoughts, by unexpected eruptions of rebellion against tyrannies, by the quick collapse of systems of power that seemed invincible.

The bad things that happen are repetitions of bad things that have always happened — war, racism, maltreatment of women, religious and nationalist fanaticism, starvation. The good things that happen are unexpected. Unexpected, and yet explainable by certain truths that spring at us from time to time, but which we tend to forget.

Political power, however formidable, is more fragile than we think. (Note how nervous are those who hold it.)

Ordinary people can be intimidated for a time, can be fooled for a time, but they have a down-deep common sense, and sooner or later they find a way to challenge the power that oppresses them.

People are not naturally violent or cruel or greedy, although they can be made so. Human beings everywhere want the same things: They are moved by the sight of abandoned children, homeless families, the casualties of war; they long for peace, for friendship and affection across lines of race and nationality.

Revolutionary change does not come as one cataclysmic moment (beware of such moments!) but as an endless succession of surprises, moving zigzag toward a more decent society.

We don't have to engage in grand, heroic actions to participate in the process of change. Small acts, when multiplied by millions of people, can transform the world.

To be hopeful in bad times is not just foolishly romantic. It is based on the fact that human history is a history not only of cruelty, but also of compassion, sacrifice, courage, kindness. What we choose to emphasize in this complex history will determine our lives.

If we see only the worst, it destroys our capacity to do something. If we remember those times and places — and there are so many — where people have behaved magnificently, this gives us the energy to act, and at least the possibility of sending this spinning top of a world in a different direction. And if we do act, in however small a way, we don't have to wait for some grand utopian future. The future is an infinite succession of presents, and to live now as we think human beings should live, in defiance of all that is bad around us, is itself a marvellous victory.

Prayer

Light and darkness.

One cancels the other out.

There can be no darkness whilst there is light. Darkness cannot consume light.

Well at least, not on its own.

The Word is in the world.
The world cannot consume the Word. Of course, many have tried.
And many have failed.

The Word.

God. Jesus. Spirit.

Creator. Teacher. Shaker.

Father. Son. Holy.

Mother. Child. Breath.

The world has tried. The world has failed. The Word shines.
And goes on shining, darkness is no match.

Blessing

May the word of God breathe in us this year.
May the love of God enliven us this year.
May the peace of God shape us this year
and may the presence of God be our companion this year and the days be
filled with wonder and hope.

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