

WORSHIP AT HOME – 21ST JUNE 2020 – THE GRACE OF GOD

Call to Worship:

Lord, we live in a world of change where every day is filled with uncertainty. We are surrounded by the twists and turns of life and we often feel that we have little or no control over things that happen to us. Lord, we stand in your eternal presence. We come to you to find ourselves – to find our way – to find our hope. We come to you because, in Christ, you first came to us. Amen.

Prayer:

Sovereign God, we come to you in awe, but also in assurance - in humility, but also in quiet confidence. We come to you, Lord, not with fear and trembling but gladly, knowing that your way is to bless instead of curse – to forgive instead of punish – to heal instead of hurt. Though we fail you, still you love us – though we prove false, always you stay true, your mercy being far wider than our own. Your mercy defies our understanding. So now, we pray, pardon our shortcomings once more – cleanse us of our faults, and help us to greet each day with gratitude, celebrating the freedom you so graciously offer to us. Help us to show a similar generosity of spirit in all our dealings with others.

In your holy name we pray - Amen

I am aware that the writer of this hymn has a mixed reputation. Here is his story [taken from The Companion to Hymns and Psalms] – can we see the grace of God working through his life?

He was the son of a shipmaster and went to sea himself as a young boy. He became reckless and ungodly. He was impressed for the navy, deserted, and was retaken. He was degraded and flogged and allowed to take service again on a ship, which turned out to be a slave ship. In Africa he fell into the hands of a brutal slave-dealer. During his escape from this man, Newton came across 'The Imitation of Christ' by Thomas a Kempis, and a desperate night on a water-logged vessel, facing death on his homeward journey, deepened his sense of a new life. From 1748-1754 he was himself a master of a slave ship – later he became a strong abolitionist. In 1754 he became Tide Surveyor at Liverpool, and there he met Wesley, Whitefield and other leaders of the evangelical revival. He began to preach and to study in the hope of being allowed to take Holy Orders, and in 1764 he was ordained and appointed curate of Olney, Buckinghamshire. Here he led a fervent congregation which attracted numerous followers, among them William Cowper. Together, Newton and Cowper projected a hymn book 'for the promotion of faith and the comfort of sincere Christians' and 'Olney Hymns' was published in 1779. Later in the same year, Newton moved to become the incumbent of St Mary Woolnoth in the City of London.

The words to 'Amazing Grace' written by John Newton [1725 – 1807]. Hymns and Psalms no. 215

Amazing grace [how sweet the sound]

That saved a wretch like me!

I once was lost, but now am found,

Was blind, but now I see.

Through many dangers, toils and snares

I have already come;

God's grace has brought me safe thus far

And he will lead me home.

The Lord has promised good to me,

His word my hope secures;
He will my shield and portion be
As long as life endures.

And when this heart and flesh shall fail
And mortal life shall cease,
I shall possess within the veil
A life of joy and peace.

How do we think of God? Do we ever think he is actually a stern judge passing sentence on our lives? We know that that is entirely the wrong picture, but nevertheless that perception can sit on the edges of thought – possibly because that is often how God was shown in the Old Testament where he was sometimes portrayed as being vindictive, jealous, angry – yet even in the OT there are still many images of God as being gentle and merciful. Perhaps we sometimes think that God is stern and severe because we have an innate sense of guilt – not that we have done anything really dreadful, but we are always aware of our faults and failings which, while separately not too bad, taken together we find huge in our minds. But whatever our reasoning, sometimes we can lose sight of the God shown to us in the Gospels and met, above all, in the person of Christ Jesus. There we find the God who refuses to condemn – the God who goes on loving despite betrayal, denial and rejection – the God who wants to forgive and forget – the God who only asks of us that we turn to him in genuine repentance and that we are resolved to start again. Our faith really is about mercy and not punishment – it is about wiping the slate clean and not about being held to account.

Let's look at one or two areas from the Gospels so that we can remind ourselves of the grace and mercy of God and remember again the wonder of what God has done – and wants to go on doing for each one of us – wants to do for all.

First, let us pray:

Prayer:

Almighty God, we thank you that we can come before you now and that you are here, wherever we are, waiting to meet with us and speak to us. We thank you that though we have no claim on your love, and no right to expect any mercy, you are always reaching out to us, eager to forgive and forget.

We thank you that though we repeatedly fail you, and though we resist your will, you go on wiping the slate clean, offering us a new beginning, a fresh start.

We thank you that you love and care about each one of us and that, for all our faults and weaknesses you accept us just as we are. You are always ready to guide us.

Almighty God, help us to open our lives to you – to be honest with you, ourselves and others. Help us to see ourselves as we really are – the good and the bad – the strengths and the weaknesses – the lovely and the unlovely. Help us to recognise the wrong we have done and to throw ourselves on your mercy.

Gracious God, open our hearts to your love and so we may receive the cleansing, the renewal and the forgiveness you so long to show us.

We pray in Jesus' precious name – Amen.

The Lord's Prayer: Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil for thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory forever and ever – Amen.

Sometimes we may find it hard to accept God's unconditional grace and mercy because in life as we know it that may seem to contradict all sense of fair play. Debts have to be paid – mistakes put right – we expect people to atone for their wrongs. On earth that seems pretty sensible as otherwise there would soon be anarchy – but God's ways are not ours – for which we are truly grateful. If he applied the same criteria we do there would be no hope for any of us.

Reading: Luke 7: 36 – 8:3 taken from The New Living Translation:

One of the Pharisees asked Jesus to come to his home for a meal, so Jesus accepted the invitation and sat down to eat. A certain immoral woman heard he was there and brought an alabaster jar filled with expensive perfume. Then she knelt behind him at his feet, weeping. Her tears fell on his feet and she wiped them off with her hair. Then she kept kissing his feet and putting perfume on them.

When the Pharisee who was the host saw what was happening and who the woman was, he said to himself: 'This proves that Jesus is no prophet. If God had really sent him, he would know what kind of woman is touching him. She is a sinner!'

The Jesus spoke up and answered his thoughts: 'Simon,' he said to the Pharisee, 'I have something to say to you.'

'All right, Teacher,' Simon replied. 'Go ahead.'

Then Jesus told him this story: 'A man loaned money to two people – 500 pieces of silver to one and 50 to the other. But neither of them could repay him, so he kindly forgave them both, cancelling their debts.

Who do you suppose loved him more after that?'

Simon answered: 'I suppose the one for whom he cancelled the larger debt.'

'That's right,' Jesus said. Then he turned to the woman and said to Simon: 'Look at this woman kneeling here. When I entered your home you didn't offer me water to wash the dust from my feet, but she has washed them with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You didn't give me a kiss of greeting, but she has kissed my feet again and again from the time I first came in. You neglected the courtesy of olive oil to anoint my head, but she has anointed my feet with rare perfume. I tell you, her sins – and they are many – have been forgiven, so she has shown me much love. But a person who is forgiven little shows only a little love.'

Then Jesus said to the woman, 'Your sins are forgiven.'

The men at the table said among themselves, 'Who does this man think he is, going around forgiving sins?'

And Jesus said to the woman, 'Your faith has saved you – go in peace.'

Not long afterwards Jesus began a tour of the nearby cities and villages to announce the Good News concerning the Kingdom of God. He took his twelve disciples with him, along with some women he had healed and from whom he had cast out evil spirits. Among them were Mary Magdalene, from whom he had cast seven demons, - Joanna, the wife of Chuza, Herod's business manager – Susanna, and many others who were contributing from their own resources to support Jesus and his disciples. *This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Amen.*

Meditation of Simon the Pharisee [written by Nick Fawcett]

Debt cancelled? Sins forgiven? What kind of talk is that?

We've rules for such things – criteria set out in the Law; and these people Jesus mixes so freely with fall short of them by a mile, wholly undeserving of pardon. He should know that, *surely*, for he's no fool – yet he not only speaks of mercy but seems to think *he* has the right to grant it. Preposterous!!

I challenged him, of course, and he came up with some hypothetical story intended to put me on the spot. But it wasn't *me* who needed to judge rightly, it was *him*.

Those in debt should pay off what they owe, that's how I saw it – and the same applies with wrongdoing. You can't just go around excusing mistakes and writing them off as though they never happened.

A price must be paid – and if the guilty party won't pay it, then *who will?*

No – he means well, I'm sure, but he's out of touch with the world, the way people really are. Give them an inch and they'll take a mile.

I'm all for forgiveness, don't get me wrong – but there needs to be change to back it up, transformation deep within – and it would take something very special to happen to achieve that, don't you think?

Something, or someone, altogether unique!

How thankful we can be that our Lord came to acquit us and not to judge us – to pardon us rather than condemn. We know that he sees through us, seeing us just as we are – he sees all our weaknesses and faults but he still goes on loving us, refusing to write us off. Can we learn, in our turn, always to see the good in others and to help them to bring out their best. That can, of course, be very difficult. We look at historical characters and it can be hard to accept them, warts and all. In our own lives we may have had to deal with very difficult circumstances and people, and still feel angry or hurt. It is so easy, then, to wonder just why we should forgive. But **we** are forgiven – all we can do is thank God for that, and endeavour to follow his way.

Prayer:

Gracious God, we thank you for calling us into fellowship and that even though we are not yet able to gather together again as yet we are still part of your people – a family united in Christ. We thank you for that privilege and responsibility.

Help us to share with one another – not just our families or friends, those people we can get on with, but all those in our church family.

Help us to care for one another – to talk to one another regularly, if not face to face then on the telephone – not just now but always. Help us to remember those who are always housebound, sick or lonely – all those who may be going through difficult times – and to take steps to show our concern and offer our support.

Help us to serve one another – ready, from our own experience of being helped by others, to encourage and strengthen others in turn – ready to put ourselves out on another's behalf and to use the gifts you have given us in the cause of Christ.

Help us to show sensitivity – to be alert to each other's needs – awake to the silent cry of suffering – conscious of the problems with which some may be wrestling, yet careful to keep a balance between being too intrusive into people's affairs, and being indifferent to their need.

Help us to be generous in spirit – to be tolerant, understanding, slow to take offence and swift to forgive.

Help us, in all our dealings with one another, to show compassion, kindness, gentleness and patience.

Gracious God, teach us what it means to be your people. Broaden our vision, enlarge our understanding, unite us in care and prayer and in thought, word and deed.

Bind us together, Lord, bind us together in love for we ask it in the name of Jesus, our Lord and Saviour.

Amen

Words to 'Bind us together, Lord' written by Bob Gillman. Songs of Fellowship no. 43.

[Those of you who remember Len Boyle may also remember that it was his favourite to sing at Housegroup.]

*Bind us together, Lord, bind us together,
With cords that cannot be broken.
Bind us together, Lord, bind us together,
Bind us together in love.*

There is only one God, there is only one King;
There is only one Body, that is why we sing; *Bind us together*.....

Made for the glory of God, purchased by his precious Son;
Born with the right to be clean, for Jesus the victory has won. *Bind us together*.....

You are the family of God; you are the promise divine;
You are God's chosen desire, you are the glorious new wine. *Bind us together*.....

Comment: When we have hurt someone is it enough for us just to say we are sorry for us to be forgiven? Genuine sorrow is sufficient – but it should also express itself in a desire to change. In other words, if it's the real thing, repentance should *show*. OK, we're not going to become whiter than white overnight – and, I suppose, we might not, in the long run, change much at all despite our best intentions – but our intentions must be there – we must try. We can see just how Zacchaeus really aimed to show his transformation through his actions.

Reading: Luke 19: 1-10 [taken from the Translation by William Barclay]:

Jesus entered Jericho, and was on his way through it. There was a man called Zacchaeus there. He was the chief tax-collector for the district, and a wealthy man. He was trying to see Jesus, but he could not because of the crowd, for he was a little man. So he ran on ahead and climbed up a sycamore tree to see Jesus, for he was to pass that way. When Jesus came on the spot, he looked up, and said: 'Zacchaeus, hurry up and come down, because I must stay at your house today.'

Zacchaeus hurried down and gladly welcomed Jesus. When they saw this, they began to complain that Jesus had gone to be the guest of a man with whom no respectable Jew would have had anything to do. But Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord: 'Sir, I am going to give half of my belongings to the poor, and, if I have swindled anyone out of anything, I am going to give him back four times as much.'

Jesus said to him: 'Today salvation has come to this house, for this man too is a son of Abraham. The Son of Man came to search for and to rescue the lost.' *Thanks be to God for His word. Amen.*

Meditation of Zacchaeus: It wasn't enough simply to say sorry – to admit I'd made mistakes. Words come cheap. Don't they? – eventually counting for nothing, however fine they seem. I needed to do more to show that I *meant* what I *said*, and so, there and then, I offered half of my possessions to the poor, and promised to repay any I'd defrauded; not just what I owed them but four times as much again.

Generous you think? Impulsive? Even over the top? Perhaps, but it was nothing compared to the riches I'd found in Jesus – the joy of being loved and accepted as I was and allowed to start again. I'd have sacrificed anything for that, and here it was, being offered to me for free: nothing demanded, nothing expected – simply held out for me to receive.

I could never repay such a gift, still less earn it – and it didn't occur to me to try. That gesture of mine was not a making amends, or settling a debt, but a way of saying thank you and sorry rolled into one; of expressing what I felt, not just in words, but in deeds.

Comment: Recognising our need for forgiveness – accepting forgiveness – celebrating that forgiveness – and offering forgiveness to others; if we put all these together, we get very close to a summary of what the Gospel is all about. How is it that Christian faith has come to be seen by so many as being preoccupied with sin and guilt? How is it that some people see the Church as being intolerant, self-righteous, narrow and judgemental? These things are the very opposite of what we should see and if, instead, we live by the grace of Christ, rejoicing in the freedom we find in him, then who we are and what we are and the way we live will speak of inner peace, love and acceptance.

We cannot answer for other people, nor for the way some will invariably misjudge us for they see only what they want to see – but we *can* answer for the message *we* put across in how we live, as best we can and with Christ's help, according to the way of grace and forgiveness. If we do that we won't – we can't – go far wrong.

Words to 'A Touching Place', written by John L Bell and Graham Maule. Songs of Fellowship 658

Christ's is the world in which we move; Christ's are the folk we are summoned to love;

Christ's is the voice which calls us to care, and Christ is the One who calls us here.

To the lost, Christ shows his face; to the unloved he gives his embrace;

To those who cry in pain or disgrace, Christ makes with his friends a touching place.

Feel for the people we most avoid, strange or bereaved or never employed;

Feel for the women and feel for the men who fear that their living is all in vain. *To the lost.....*

Feel for the parents who've lost their child; feel for the women whom men have defiled;

Feel for the baby for whom there's no breast, and feel for the weary who find no rest. *To the lost.....*

Feel for the lives by life confused, riddled with doubt, in loving abused;

Feel for the lonely heart, conscious of sin, which longs to be pure but fears to begin. *To the lost.....*

Closing Prayer and Blessing:

We return, Lord, to our daily round, assured of your pardon, thankful for the chance to start again – resolved to live changed lives – determined to show our gratitude and eager to show mercy to others in turn. Keep that flame burning within us, that confidence strong and determination real, so that we may truly live as your people – redeemed, restored, renewed, refashioned – our lives testifying unmistakably to your gracious love. The blessing of God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit, be with us all now and evermore.