

Sunday 15 November 2020, a service for use at home; Haddington West Church

Grace be with you and peace from God, our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ

Ps.123: *"I lift up my eyes to you, to you who sit enthroned in heaven. As the eyes of slaves look to the hand of their master, as the eyes of a female slave look to the hand of her mistress, so our eyes look to the LORD our God, till he shows us his mercy.*

Have mercy on us, LORD, have mercy on us, for we have endured no end of contempt. We have endured no end of ridicule from the arrogant, of contempt from the proud."

Collect: Almighty God, you sent us your Son Jesus Christ to be the light of the world. Free us from all that darkens and ensnares us, and bring us to eternal light and joy; through the power of him who is alive and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen

1 I, the Lord of sea and sky,
I have heard My people cry.
All who dwell in dark and sin
My hand will save.
I who made the stars of night,
I will make their darkness bright.
Who will bear My light to them?
Whom shall I send?
Here I am, Lord.
Is it I, Lord?
I have heard You calling in the night.
I will go, Lord,
if You lead me.
I will hold Your people in my heart.

2 I, the Lord of snow and rain,
I have borne My people's pain.
I have wept for love of them.
They turn away.
I will break their hearts of stone,
give them hearts for love alone.
I will speak My word to them.
Whom shall I send?
Here I am, Lord . . .

3 I, the Lord of wind and flame,
I will tend the poor and lame.
I will set a feast for them.
My hand will save.
Finest bread I will provide
till their hearts are satisfied.
I will give My life to them.
Whom shall I send?
Here I am, Lord . . .

Words and music by Daniel Schutte

Jonah 4, 1-11 **But to Jonah this seemed very wrong, and he became angry. He prayed to the LORD, 'Isn't this what I said, LORD, when I was still at home? That is what I tried to forestall by fleeing to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in**

love, a God who relents from sending calamity. Now, LORD, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live.'

But the LORD replied, 'Is it right for you to be angry?'

Jonah had gone out and sat down at a place east of the city. There he made himself a shelter, sat in its shade and waited to see what would happen to the city. Then the LORD God provided a leafy plant and made it grow up over Jonah to give shade for his head to ease his discomfort, and Jonah was very happy about the plant. But at dawn the next day God provided a worm, which chewed the plant so that it withered. When the sun rose, God provided a scorching east wind, and the sun blazed on Jonah's head so that he grew faint. He wanted to die, and said, 'It would be better for me to die than to live.'

But God said to Jonah, 'Is it right for you to be angry about the plant?' 'It is,' he said, 'And I'm so angry I wish I were dead.' But the LORD said, 'You have been concerned about this plant, though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight. And should I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left – and also many animals?'

Dear friends

When we hear how Jonah reacts to the fact that Nineveh's repentance occasioned God's mercy and compassion so that "*he relented and did not bring on them the destruction he had threatened*" (3,10), we wonder: Has this man not learned his lesson? It seems strange that his stance and attitude should be the same as it was when he decided to flee from God because he wanted Nineveh to suffer and perish, as it was before he himself came through judgment and grace, yielded to God and was saved from destruction. But here he is, unwilling to take Nineveh's repentance in good faith, unwilling to identify with that community of sinners and God's purpose, and unwilling to see the way of grace in what was to happen!

As you will notice, the book of Jonah ends in a way that leaves it open whether Jonah got the lesson or not. The reason for this is that we, lacking this kind of conclusion, are not permitted to walk away but have to step ourselves into this openness and hear the question asked of us – have we learned the lesson? For the lesson of grace is one we all have to learn.

The Jonah we come face to face with in chapter 4 is somewhat like a mirror which can bring us face to face with ourselves. This imagery of the 'mirror' is used by James in his epistle in a way which is appropriate for here too. James speaks of people who hear the word of God but do not do it. "*Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like someone who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like.*" (Jam.1,23-24) Now, Jonah has heard for himself the word of grace, has himself come through judgment and grace, but when he turns from himself to others he does not do as he heard; he hears grace but he does not do grace, he does not want to see grace prevail. Like James's mirror-man forgets what he looks like the moment he goes away, so Jonah typifies the person who forgets the grace and love of God when the context changes from what it means for him to what it means for others, for those he has to do with! It is as if the normal, natural, intended flow of God's word (of judgment and grace), which is from being heard to being done, is interrupted – some kind of 'forgetting' sets in and stops grace in its track. Jonah is all judgment-minded, grace is all but forgotten.

We must take this to heart and examine ourselves. When Jonah cries out in anger 'If this is what you saved me for, if you saved me so that Nineveh – Israel's enemy! – should now have a benefit from it, then I'd rather you hadn't!', God's reply is: *"Is it right for you to be angry?"*

Is it right for us if we claim the grace of Christ, the forgiveness of sins and life everlasting, to withhold love, goodwill and mercy from anyone we deal with, to harbour resentment and wish they got what they deserved? Is it right for us if God forgives our sins, to refuse to forgive those who sin against us? Is it right for us to hear grace for ourselves, but not do grace for others? Is it right for us who know the way of salvation, to care not for the salvation of others? Is it right that we should care so little for what God saves us *for* – doing his will in serving our neighbour in ways of mercy and grace?

This question searches us no less than it does Jonah. So let us stand with him as God turns on the heat to clarify what's at stake. Growing a "leafy plant" which gives Jonah shade and makes him very happy he then causes to wither overnight, leaving Jonah exposed to the heat of the day as he sits hoping to see destruction come to Nineveh. To this Jonah reacts with red-hot anger, an anger he feels is totally justified. Why did God do that?! Why does God cause him this suffering?! But if to Jonah's anger it was not right for God to destroy the plant, why should it be right for God to destroy the people of Nineveh when they repent? Why should it be right for Jonah to use two different measures, to exclude Nineveh from the purpose of grace? God points out to Jonah that he has forgotten that God is one who wants sinners to repent and live and that he does not properly consider the grace of God because he considers grace only in as far as it concerns him!

Dear friends, what should Jonah do, how should he respond? What should we do, if we find in ourselves hardness of heart towards another, especially a brother or a sister, a lack of warm love, an unforgiving spirit, an eagerness to emphasize sins and failings, a resolve to bear grudges and a desire to see judgment? What should we do, if we cannot forgive and love the undeserving and the enemy? What should we do, if we are Jonah, have his sense of wrong and have his anger towards that community of sinners which lives by God's grace alone and with which he cannot and does not want to identify?

The openness of the book of Jonah, of the question arising in chapter 4, suggests that the answer is not in Jonah, but that the answer must happen *to* Jonah, by one who comes after him and is greater than him; that it is a matter of God's grace being the same for Jonah as what it is for Nineveh.

And God's grace is Jesus Christ, who, identifying with sinners, calls them to himself in order to redeem them, so creating a community of redeemed sinners where through repentance and faith it learns the lesson he gave them in laying down his life for them (this community!) – that it should love as he loves them, because they live for him who lives for them.

Therefore, where there is the anger of Jonah, let there be repentance in the knowledge that we are a community of sinners and in the knowledge that God is concerned to help us and will in Jesus Christ give grace. AMEN

1 Wonderful grace
that gives what I don't deserve,
pays me what Christ has earned,
then lets me go free.
Wonderful grace
that gives me the time to change,
washes away the stains

that once covered me.

*And all that I have
I lay at the feet
of the wonderful Saviour
who loves me.*

2 Wonderful love
that held in the face of death,
breathed in its latest breath
forgiveness for me.
Wonderful love,
whose power can break every chain,
giving us life again
and setting us free.
And all that I have . . .

Words and music by John Pantry
Music arranged by Christopher Norton

Prayer

Lord God, we pray remove in us the obstacles we put in the way of the flow of your grace. We thank you that Jesus identified with sinners and died for us so that our lives in the light of your mercy and grace may be bright. Forgive us when we forget what you have saved us for who live by grace alone – to help make the lives of those around us brighter through ways of grace in faith, hope and love. Strengthen our union with Jesus Christ and in him with one another.

- time of prayer / intercession –

‘Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one. For yours is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen’

“May the God of peace, who brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great Shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of an eternal covenant, make you perfect in all goodness so that you may do his will; and may he create in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever!” Hebr.13, 20-21

And the blessing of God almighty, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit be among you and remain with you.

AMEN