

Worship from the URC's Daily Devotions
Sunday 20th September 2020

Hello. I'm Anne Sardeson and I'm speaking to from my home in Leytonstone East London, where I have been living for 10 years while serving as Training Officer for Thames North Synod. However, when you hear this, I will have moved to Burnham-on-Crouch in Essex as I return to local pastorate there along with the URCs in Maldon and Southminster.

Call To Worship

One: To all who are imprisoned,

Many: God says, "Come out."

One: To all who are living in darkness,

Many: God says, "Show yourselves"

One: To all who hunger and thirst,

Many: God gives food and springs of water.

One: To all who are far away,

Many: God makes smooth the way home.

God will not forget us,

we are inscribed on the palms of His hands.

Prayers of approach, confession and forgiveness

Giver of Life, Maker of Truth, Way of Wisdom: all glory be to you, here among us: light in our darkness, hope in our despair, love in our fear. Grace for our failings, joy for our tears, strength for our weakness. Connection in our disunity, understanding in our confusion, recognition in our ignorance.

Giver of Life, Maker of Truth, Way of Wisdom, we praise you for all that you are and all that you do! This day, let us not offer to you that which costs us nothing. Let us offer all that we have, all that we are. This day they us not be afraid that what we offer will not be enough. Know that all we are is known to God. Let us offer all that we can carry no longer. The things we regret, the harsh words and thoughtless acts, the lack of trust and over dependence on ourselves. Let us offer all to God, giver of life, maker of truth, way of wisdom

God knows us and loves us. In Christ Jesus God dwelt with us, full of grace and truth. With patience and hope in Christ, God's love was made known to us. We are accepted and loved, forgiven and freed. Let us live with this truth. All glory be to you, Giver of Life, Maker of Truth, Way of Wisdom, this day and evermore. Amen!

Hymn R&S 560:

Glorious things of thee are spoken,
Zion city of our God!
He whose word can ne'er be broken
formed thee for His own abode.
*On the Rock of Ages founded
who can shake Thy sure repose?
With salvation's wall surrounded,
Thou mayst smile at all thy foes.*

See! The streams of living waters,
Springing from eternal love,
well supply thy sons and daughters
and all fear of want remove:
who can faint, while such a river
ever flows, their thirst to assuage -
grace, which, like the Lord, the giver,
never fails from age to age.

Saviour, if of Zion's city
I, through grace a member am
let the world deride or pity,
I will glory in they name.
Fading is the worldling's pleasure,
All his boasted pomp and show;
Solid joys and lasting treasure
None but Zion's children know.

John Newton (1779)

Prayer of illumination

Way of Wisdom, open us now to your living word; that we will know how wonderful you are and find you in your holy place.

Readings: Jonah 3: 10-4:11
St Matthew 20: 1-16

Sermon

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable to you, our strength and our salvation.

There is grumbling in our scripture today. One of the grumblers is Jonah, who is grumbling at God because of the treatment of the people of Nineveh. The story of Jonah is one that is pretty well-known and is always worth telling again. Jonah is called by God to go to Nineveh and preach repentance. Jonah, fearful of what a great task this is, perhaps because he has heard how terribly wicked the people of Nineveh are reported to be, goes in the opposite direction and takes to the sea. Finding their journey stormy, the ship's crew discover Jonah is fleeing from his God and, surmising that he is the root of their misfortune, they throw him overboard, where he finds himself in the belly of a big fish. After spending 3 days and nights in the belly of the fish Jonah is spewed up on a beach. God sees him there and calls him again, and this time Jonah does as he is told and goes to preach in Nineveh. And then the most surprising thing happens, the thing any preacher might long for: the people of Nineveh listen and take notice. They do indeed repent of their wicked ways and pray for mercy. At which point God responds with mercy and, as we read, Jonah grumbles.

The other grumblers are the "all day" workers. They have been hired at a fair wage to work in the vineyard for the day and come the end of the day they go to get their wages. The story is told well and sets us up for the shock at the end, because along with the "all day" workers are the "slightly later" workers, the "half day" workers, the "late afternoon" workers and the "barely got an hour in before we finished" workers. And the workers are paid in reverse order, so that the ones who came last get paid first and the ones who came first get paid last, no doubt with the expectation that they will get a bonus above that which was agreed because they have worked longer than the later arrivals. But they don't. They get paid what was agreed, which happens to be the same as the rest, regardless of how many hours they have worked. And the "all day" workers grumble because like Jonah they are really rather cross with how things have turned out.

And we may well understand the grumblers. We may well, with Jonah, think that the wicked people of Nineveh deserved to be punished. We might also think it only right that people who work for an hour get paid less than those who work for 3, 6, 9 or 12 hours. I am pretty sure that in each of us there is at least a little bit that gets the grumbling and that's because it's very natural to grumble when things don't seem fair. This

often happens for us when we read scripture and make it all about us. But what if it is all about God?

What if, instead of being the story of Jonah, we call it the story of God and Jonah, or God and Nineveh? Where do Jonah and Nineveh fit into God's story?

It seems that Jonah may well fit into God's story as someone who was good enough to do an important job, despite being a little bit flakey and rather grumbly. This is quite hopeful really, because Jonah is not alone in having these tendencies. I too have been known to be both. And where is Nineveh in God's story? News had reached God of the wickedness of the people of the great city and God longs for change and when change comes, mercy is their gift. Because, as the scripture tells us, God has concern for all the people (and animals) of the city. Jonah then becomes a reminder to all of us that we can be quite shocked by God's mercy and Nineveh becomes a reminder to all of us that we can be saved by God's mercy. Shocked and saved, all in the one story. Perhaps this might be a good way to sum up something of how we can find ourselves in God's story.

And if the parable of the workers is to be read as the parable of the landowner, what do we discover? We discover a landowner who keeps their word: they pay those who have worked a 12 hour shift the agreed rate for the time worked. We also discover a landowner who seems to subvert usual economics by paying some workers a little more than they are due and others a great deal more than they are due. If we ask where God is, then we might well say that God is this landowner who seems to have a very odd view of how things should play out. This is no way to run a business. But then of course, this is not a business, this is God's story.

If this is a story about people like you and me becoming aware of God's place in our lives and entering into some kind of relationship with God, we discover that when our story joins God's story, strange things happen. What we think we deserve will not be what we receive. We may think we are worthy of more than others because we see our relationship with God as being deeper or older or more faithful. But no, we get what we are promised. We may think we are worthy of a lot less than we are offered because we see our relationship with God as fragile or new or struggling. But no, we get what God's wants to give us.

What do we learn of God in our scripture today? We learn of concern, and love, and perseverance, and honour, and passion, and cost, and grace. We learn that in response to a question from Peter about how much he and his fellow disciples have given up and what they might get in return, Jesus reminds them that this isn't about being given some place of great standing as the ones who were first. This is not about what's in it for them, this is about where they are in God's story. Peter, presumably speaking on behalf of the other disciples, has made it all about them. But that is not the case. This is all about God creating a new realm, a new way of seeing the world where it is not about status and reward but about welcome and grace and huge surprises. "Many of the first will be last and the last first" he says to Peter and anyone else who wants to listen, and goes on to tell the story of the landowner and some workers who come, bit by bit, to the vineyard and discover that the last are indeed the first and the first are last.

If we think that being a disciple is about getting some great reward for our longstanding faithfulness, then we are as mistaken as Peter and the other disciples. It is not. It is about joining our story with God's story and finding our way into something that twists the ways of our world that have become our norm, not least that the ones who get up early and work hard get the best bits in the end. If we fear that we've come along a bit late, maybe only repented when Jonah reluctantly came and shouted at us about the error of our ways, and we suspect that we don't know what others seem to take for granted, and worry that God won't have noticed that we've joined our story with God's story, then we can rejoice: there is no pecking order in God's realm.

Because God is like a landowner who says it doesn't matter when you join in, you are part of the whole story: my story.

So, we care for new ones. We value what is brought, we value what we are together. And we don't fear if we are a newer one, for we are all precious. We are all part of a big story. A story that has Jonah in it, a big fish in it, the people and animals of Nineveh in it, 12 fumbling (and possible grumbling) disciples in it, lots of people through many ages in it and you and me. There is no first, there is no last, there is simply a story: God's story, and we are in this story together.

Hymn R&S 92:

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.

'Twas grace that taught
my heart to fear
and grace, my fears relieved.
How precious did that grace appear
the hour I first believed!

Through many dangers,
toils and snares
we have already come
'Twas grace that brought us safe
thus far
and grace will lead us 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.

John Newton

Affirmation of Faith

We believe in God, creator of all,
whose word sustains the life of humanity,
and directs our history. God is our life.

We believe in God's Son,
born amongst the poor, light in our night,
first-born from the dead. He is alive.

We believe in the Holy Spirit,
who gives birth to the new life of God,
who breathes life into the struggle for justice,
who leads us to hope, who is a living force.

We believe in the holy universal Church,
herald of the Good News
which frees people and brings new life.
We believe in the coming of a new world
where Jesus Christ, our Lord, will be all in all. Amen.

Prayers of Concern

O God we pray this day for the world that you care for....
For those who struggle this day with burdens that are beyond them.
For lives that are torn apart by war and greed and distrust.
For all we know and all we do not know.
For stories that are heard and stories that are hidden.
For names that are familiar and names that are lost.
We pray O God, knowing that you love your world and call us into love.

O God we pray this day for our local communities.....
For those who ask us to pray and those who do not.
For those we love and those we barely know.
For all that is a part of our everyday lives and all that we miss.
We pray O God, knowing that you love our communities and call us into love.

O God we pray for ourselves,
For the fears and hopes that fill our lives.
For the prayers we struggle to utter
And the words that get stuck in our throats.
We pray knowing that you hear us better than we are able to pray,
asking that you will help us to seek, find and fully realise
the compassion that lives within us that they inspire and fill all we do.
These prayers we offer, words, silence, deep longings,
In the name of Jesus Christ, who taught us when we pray to say together
Our Father..... Amen

Hymn tune Hyfrydol (R&S 663):

God is Love: let heav'n adore Him;
God is Love: let earth rejoice;
let creation sing before Him,
and exalt Him with one voice.
He who laid the earth's foundation,
He who spread the heav'ns above,
He who breathes
through all creation,
He is Love, eternal Love.

God is Love: and he enfoldeth
all the world in one embrace;
with unfailing grasp he holdeth
every child of every race.
And when human
hearts are breaking
under sorrow's iron rod,
then they find that self-same aching
deep within the heart of God.

God is Love: and though with blindness sin afflicts the souls of all,
God's eternal loving-kindness holds and guides us when we fall.
Sin and death and hell shall never o'er us final triumph gain;
God is Love, so Love for ever o'er the universe must reign.

Timothy Rees (1922)

Blessing

The blessing of God who speaks our name

The blessing of God who sits at our table

The blessing of God who knows us

Be with us this day, this week and forever. Amen

Sources and Thanks

Call to Worship from Feasting on the Word Year A

Affirmation of Faith from the Reformed Church of France.

All other material from Anne Sardeson.