

THE SECOND WEDNESDAY IN LENT 2019: THE PURPOSE OF GRACE

(JONAH 3:1-10; Ps 51:1-2,10-12; LUKE 11:29-32)

In the Old Testament, the Hebrew word 'chesed' is used to refer to God's work in delivering His people from the enemy, or from affliction, or from adversity. It also denotes enablement, guidance, forgiveness and preservation. In the New Testament, the Greek word 'charis' is associated with whatever God does to effect our salvation.

Grace surprises, amazes, delights, catches our breath, disarms, thrills.... It is unexpected: we are carrying on with our ordinary lives, everything is predictable, routine, nothing out of the ordinary – then grace happens, like a shower of rain that is not forecast, when it is hot, dry, dusty. I used to take Communion to an elderly man, in Kempton Park. He is in a wheelchair. He and his wife went shopping, one ordinary day, and loaded their trolley with quite a lot of stuff. At the till, he presented his credit card – but, before the assistant could take his card, a woman behind them leaned over, with her card, and said: "I'll pay for that!". Apparently, something good had happened to her, recently, and she wanted to bless someone else. Grace is infectious: the person who is graced, or benefits from grace, naturally feels inclined to express grace: at least, that is how it is meant to be. The person who is forgiven, becomes forgiving; the person who is touched by God's grace, perhaps through someone else, touches others with grace.

During Lent, when we pray Morning and Evening Prayer, one of the two sentences we are given to say is: "The goodness of God leads to repentance". The first response to God's grace might be repentance. As I said last week: repentance itself is a gift of God, a grace given by God. We receive grace to repent; God's Spirit creates a desire in us to repent of our sins. In today's Old Testament lesson, God gives Jonah a second chance. The first time, he is told to go to Nineveh and preach against it, pronouncing God's judgment because of her wickedness. Jonah disobeys, because the Ninevites are the enemy, and he wants them destroyed: if he warns them of God's judgment, they might repent; and, if they repent, God might relent, and not destroy them. Jonah has had experience of God before – and he really doesn't want grace to intervene. Jonah has had the horrible experience of being thrown overboard, being swallowed by a large fish,

languishing there for three days and three nights (God's judgment for his rebellion); and, afterwards, being regurgitated, from the fish's belly, onto dry land. The experience is meant to be transformative. Jonah is given a second chance: again he is told by God to go to Nineveh and warn of God's judgment. This time he obeys. But, just as he suspects, the king and all the inhabitants repent – and God decides to be gracious. Judgment is averted! Jonah is furious. Despite the fact that he has received grace, he remains moody, mean-spirited and ungracious. "I am angry enough to die", he says. This is an unnatural response to grace.

The Scriptures are full of stories of people responding positively to God's grace: like Zaccheus the tax-collector who, when visited by Jesus, is touched and transformed: "Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount." Zaccheus's response is an indication of salvation. A blind beggar receives his sight: his response is to follow Jesus, praising God. Simon Peter's mother-in-law is healed by Jesus from a high fever: her response is to serve Jesus and His disciples. The paralyzed man receives healing: his response is to praise God – and everyone who witnesses the healing praises God, too. When Jesus is having dinner with Simon the Pharisee, a woman who has led a sinful life brings an alabaster jar of perfume, stands behind Jesus, weeps at His feet, wets his feet with her tears, wipes them with her hair, kisses them and pours perfume on them. Clearly, she has been touched by God, through Jesus, and responds with extravagant devotion. Her many sins are forgiven, because of her love. The loving compassion of Jesus fills the woman with love and gratitude and, when she expresses this in a sincere, spontaneous way, she is granted assurance of forgiveness. A demon-possessed man is set free by Jesus: he begs Jesus to be allowed to go with Him – but Jesus says: "Return home and tell how much God has done for you." He tells people all over town how much Jesus has done for him.

When other people are the recipients of God's grace, we need to be gracious enough to rejoice with them. In the parable of the Prodigal Son, the older brother resents the fact that his father honours his younger brother, who has been irresponsible and reckless. He is unwilling to join in the celebrations, because he thinks that his younger brother is undeserving of this special treatment. He has

worked faithfully and responsibly, and never received such honour. In Psalm 51, which we looked at last week, God's goodness and compassion inspire confidence in David to seek forgiveness from God for his shocking behavior – which involved adultery and conspiring to murder.

The purpose of God's grace:

1. To evoke a spirit of repentance
2. To convert – to turn us towards Him
3. To quicken us – to awaken us to His love and fill us with His life
4. To produce a response of gratitude
5. To surprise, thrill and delight us
6. To release us from guilt, shame and self-condemnation
7. To transform us, so that we are gracious, forgiving, loving, generous
8. To give us another chance
9. To equip us with gifts for ministry
10. To reveal the truth about God and His purposes, and to help us to understand the Scriptures

Grace is administered by the Spirit, Who renews our spirits, purifies our consciences, enlightens our minds, strengthens our faith, directs us into God's will, warms our hearts with God's love, elevates our thoughts, revives our nature, brings peace and joy, makes us bold and courageous, gives us real conviction, creates new desires, prompts new zeal, comforts, makes us spiritual (as opposed to worldly), helps us to become like Jesus, gives us a sense of purpose, etcetera.

Sometimes, receiving God's grace leads to repentance; repentance leads to forgiveness; forgiveness leads to gratitude and transformation.

PRAYER

Lord God, I praise You for all the demonstrations of grace
which I have experienced in my life.

Thank You for the times when I have been surprised and delighted.

Thank You for the way in which You use gracious people to touch me.

When I receive grace, help me to respond with grace

seeking to bless others, so that they experience grace, too.

I pray that Your goodness will lead me, always, to repentance.

Help me not to be mean-spirited, so that I am unable to rejoice

with others who are rejoicing, when we see Your grace at work.

Humble me, through all of life's experiences;

Set me free from resentment;

Help me to be transformed, so that I am like Jesus.

Grant that my response to experiences of grace will mirror

the enthusiasm of Zaccheus

the gratitude of the blind beggar

the readiness to serve, expressed by Peter's mother-in-law

the worship of the paralyzed man

the devotion of the woman who had led a sinful life

the spontaneous sharing of the good news of Your love

demonstrated by the demon-possessed man whom Jesus healed.

Thank You that there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus:

Help me not to condemn myself, or anyone else –

Instead, help me to know, and express, the grace of forgiveness

that flows from repentance.

I pray this in the name of the One Who is full of grace and truth –

Jesus, Your Son, my Saviour.

Amen

QUESTIONS:

1. When have you been surprised by grace? How did that experience affect you?
2. When has repentance been most real for you?
3. Have you ever, as a direct result of your experience of grace, been deliberately gracious to someone else? How? When?
4. Can you relate to Jonah, and identify with him, and with the older brother in the parable of the Prodigal Son, in their mean-spiritedness? (You might like to read, and meditate on, Jonah 3:1-10 and Luke 15:11-32)
5. Have you experienced grace in someone else that has made you feel bad about your own attitude?
6. Has God given you a 'second chance'? In what way?
7. Read the following passages, and put yourself in the place of
 - a) Zaccheus (Luke 19:1-10)
 - b) the woman who had lived a sinful life (Luke 7:36-50)
8. Has God's grace transformed you? How?
9. Nelson Mandela ranks as one of the most gracious people who has lived in our times. Has his life impacted yours? How? What do you think made him so gracious? What should we learn from him?
10. Pray the prayer above every day for the week ahead.