

14th March 2021 6 pm Grace and Faith Working Together

Led by Emma Latham. Talk by Rob Latham, Readings by Hamish Blair and Emma Latham, Prayers by Felicity Hawke

This talk is only of the readings, psalm and sermon

1st Reading: Ephesians 2:1-10

1 As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, 2 in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. 3 All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath. 4 But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, 5 made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions – it is by grace you have been saved. 6 And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, 7 in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. 8 For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – 9 not by works, so that no one can boast. 10 For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

Psalm 107:1-9

1 Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; ♦ his love endures for ever.
2 Let the redeemed of the LORD tell their story – ♦ those he redeemed from the hand of the foe,
3 those he gathered from the lands, ♦ from east and west, from north and south.
4 Some wandered in desert wastelands, ♦ finding no way to a city where they could settle.
5 They were hungry and thirsty, ♦ and their lives ebbed away.
6 Then they cried out to the LORD in their trouble, ♦ and he delivered them from their distress.
7 He led them by a straight way ♦ to a city where they could settle.
8 Let them give thanks to the LORD for his unfailing love ♦ and his wonderful deeds for mankind,
9 for he satisfies the thirsty ♦ and fills the hungry with good things.

Glory to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit;
as it was in the beginning is now and shall be for ever.

Amen.

2nd Reading: John 3:4-21 [NIVUK 1984]

4 “How can a man be born when he is old?” Nicodemus asked. “Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother’s womb to be born!”

5 Jesus answered, “I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. 6 Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. 7 You should not be surprised at my saying, ‘You must be born again.’ 8 The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.”

9 “How can this be?” Nicodemus asked.

10 “You are Israel’s teacher,” said Jesus, “and do you not understand these things? 11 I tell you the truth, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony. 12 I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? 13 No one has ever gone into heaven except the one

who came from heaven – the Son of Man. 14 Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, 15 that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.’

16 For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. 17 For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. 18 Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son. 19 This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. 20 Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. 21 But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God.

This is the Word of the Lord

Thanks be to God

Sermon

[Rob:] Well, good evening again. Shall we pray.

Father, may I speak in the name of God, who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
Amen.

I've got a very significant anniversary coming up next Sunday actually. I thought it was somewhere between this Sunday and next, but I discovered by checking on my old diaries that it is actually next Sunday. And I know I only still like a youthful sort of person in my 50s, but the reality is that I'm much older than that, and it's now 50 years next Sunday to when I preached my first sermon. Well, that gives you some indication of my age maybe. That first sermon was based on the studies of Job that I'd done as an A-level student in my Sixth Form. And I chose as my text Job 19 verse 25¹, still imprinted on my heart, which is,

For I know that my Redeemer lives, and at last he will stand upon the earth.

And that sounds pretty much a sermon that will be full of faith, and in my indeed my sermon, my very first sermon, was about faith. It was about the desire, the need, to have a first-hand experience of the living God, so that one could live a Christian life and follow faithfully in the way in which we are called. Unfortunately what I was preaching, and I often say to myself actually, that I preach to myself as much as to anybody else (I always want to take my lessons to you as seriously for myself, if you see, because I think that's quite important, that would otherwise make me a little bit of a hypocrite I think). But if anything was true, that certainly was not true for myself. I was not at all a person full of faith. I mean, looking back on it now, I think I probably had more faith than I actually thought, because I can see what I was trying to get at. But the reality was, I didn't have an experience of a living God. And what I was preaching about was definitely intended for me, because that is exactly what I was seeking.

And yet, I'm bound to say that in my unfaith, in my unbelief, there was an awful lot of God's grace working. And I just thank God that I recall that people did respond to my sermons in those early days, and they did hear faith being preached. For me, it was to be a little while longer before my journey of faith was complete. And indeed, to show how short my faith was, one of the issues that I had to face as training to be a Methodist local preacher, as I was at the time, was that you had to face up to a trial examination by your peers as already qualified Methodist local preachers and ministers of the circuit at the

1 [RSV]

local preachers' meeting. My recollection is I'd sat, as I'd listened to two other local preachers, who are about to be fully accredited, as it's called, and they were asked a question about grace. The question about grace was simply this, "How would you define it, what do you understand by the word grace?" My recollection that one of them spoke about the gracefulness of a swan. Which is true, you watch any swan on a river or lake, and you will see a swan gliding on the face of the water. What perhaps you don't see of course is the feet paddling away underneath, that are actually showing how hard that that glide, which looks serene to us, is having to be worked on. But then another Methodist local preacher commented to me afterwards, he said really, he said, "I was rather disappointed by the answer of what was given about grace in that, Robert, I really do hope that when you're being examined that you'll actually have better things to say." Needless to say, that filled me with some trepidation as to exactly what I might say. Though, I have to say, thinking about it, all those many years ago, I do believe that I might have had a little bit of a better answer, because my thought about grace then was simply that it was the active love of God working out in this world.

Well, faith still eluded me, even when I was recognised as a Methodist local preacher. There was something which still was absent in my mind. I remember the service to this day, a preaching of a very personal sermon by the preacher, and the moment in which God's grace touched my life again because, as we were singing the hymn before communion, which was *O Thou Who Camest From Above*, for three of those verses I sensed a real surge of God's power in me and wondered what on earth it was that lifted my heart in praise and here I now recognise was God's Spirit working and active. The problem was, it only lasted for about three verses. And then we were into the service again and life resumed its normal play.

I was just shy of being 21 when I was recognised as a Methodist local preacher, and it took me another 18 months to come to the point of surrender, and through the help of an Anglican prayer fellowship, to be prayed over for the baptism of the Holy Spirit. But you know, having found faith in that experience and encounter with God, then my life, I suppose, has never been the same since. And it explains an awful lot about what progressed on from there, and to be ordained etc. etc. But it's interesting: when I shared my dilemma, both corporately and individually with other people, then I got an awful lot of encouragement. One of those encouragements was to be told the story of John Wesley and Peter Böhler. John Wesley himself had a real search for faith until on the 24th of May 1738, 'his heart was strangely warmed'. When confiding in his friend Peter Böhler, a Moravian, he was told, "John, preach faith till you have faith. And then you will have faith indeed."² I think I tried to do that. And my reason, of course, for sharing this is in the reading that Hamish read for us from Ephesians: we're told very clearly that we are saved by God by grace, through faith.

You see, the connection of faith and grace is so important. Grace, as the Living Bible has it, is the unmerited favour of God. It's about sheer gift, it's a matter that God gives us out of His grace and glory into the impoverished rubbish of what our lives would be without it, and God always acts before us, so everything that He does for us is sheer gift. And that gift is grace. It's this unmerited favour, this supreme love shown into our hearts. And the way that we respond to that love is by faith, by accepting it, trusting it, and believing it. The day I was baptised in the Holy Spirit, with those Anglican people around me praying for me, I was simply asked, "Robert, do you wish to be baptised in the Holy Spirit? Do you wish to receive the Holy Spirit?" And I just said, "Yes." And that was the prayer, "Receive God's Holy Spirit." And my life of faith truly began.

We turn now to the Gospel reading from John's gospel, which Emma read for us. As we begin to hear how Jesus is teaching Nicodemus, we're told by Jesus that He,

2 <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/wesley/journal.vi.ii.xi.html>

the Son of Man, must be lifted up in order to do what God wishes for Him to do. And He uses that phrase, and says that it would be rather like Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness. So here we need to actually recall what that was about. In actual fact, if we'd had the three readings set for today, the Old Testament reading would have been from the book of Numbers, and would have been exactly this one³. But let me tell you the story. As you know, the Exodus period, when the Israelites left Egypt, and headed to the Promised Land, was not actually one that was plain sailing. They moaned and groaned continually and when they first got the opportunity to enter into the Promised Land, their lack of faith meant that they refused even to make the attempt. And so they were condemned by God to travelling around the wilderness of Sinai for 40 years (It's interesting that their clothes and their shoes never wore out). And during one of these times of wanderings, there was a time when the people of Israel sinned. The Bible tells us, as a punishment, God sent amongst them poisonous snakes. And these poisonous snakes bit the people, and a number of people died because of it. And clearly, those who didn't die were constantly under the threat of receiving a bite that could at any moment kill them. The people cried out to Moses, they were called to repentance, and Moses, in order to help them out of this dilemma, made a bronze snake, impaled it on a stick and held it up prominently or placed it, held up high, in a prominent place where the people who were being bitten could come and look at the snake, see it impaled, and they would look on it and be healed.

In some senses, it seems to me to act very much like a sacrament. A sacrament of course, if we recall maybe our confirmation, is defined by the Book of Common Prayer as an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace. Of course, it's not an active thing like Holy Communion or Baptism, which are the two main sacraments, but it has all the hallmarks of a sacred sign that is set up by Moses, and in God's grace, if we look in faith and trust, that looking at this serpent would actually heal the people: they were healed. And this bronze serpent was kept as a treasured possession. Much, much later when they were settled in the Promised Land and the kings, King Saul, David and Solomon, had long gone, then King Hezekiah destroyed the snake, because people were beginning to make an idol of it, and he felt that was very wrong. But if we think of this sign as a sacrament, then we clearly have something of God's grace acting in order to bring healing to the people. When bitten, all they had to do was look upon this impaled serpent that Moses had made, and their trusting and believing God's work in their lives, they found healing, and the problem was solved.

In many ways, I think the Old Testament is best understood in the same sort of way as a book of faith. We actually think the Old Testament is maybe more about law and anticipating the coming of Jesus. But you know, the foundations of faith are actually laid for us in the context of the Old Testament. The living-out of the Law was an act in itself of faith. And of course, the foundations of faith is found in the story of Abraham, the man who trusted God to travel far away from his kindred and his family and friends to a place that God only told him that he would actually live in, once he'd arrived. He had no idea where he was travelling until then. And Abraham is often called the father of faith. And Abraham was counted as righteous, we're told in Scripture, because of his faith, because he believed he was counted as righteous before God. And therefore is the father of faith, the archetype person of faith, the person that we can look to, not just to Jesus, of course, who is the author and perfecter of our faith (as Hebrews tells us) but actually to a human being, like us, who trusted and followed Father God.

And so we come to consider this in the context of what Jesus calls us to. When Jesus talks about being lifted up, He's obviously referring to His crucifixion. And then, in the gospel of John, we're told that the motivation for this is God's love for the world. I recall taking a funeral to one of my smaller churches before retirement (well a fair bit before retirement actually), and

3 Numbers 21:4-9

wanted to quote these very famous words, and found as I tried to, I'd forgotten them! Let's see if I can remember them [John 3:16, RSV] now.

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

My goodness. Isn't that wonderful? The most famous words in the Bible. The ones, indeed, from which our own website takes its name⁴. John 3:16 is the way in which you log on to the website. And here is grace: God, from the time that we first fell into sin, when Adam and Eve had first plucked from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil the fruit that was forbidden to them, and eaten of it, God had already planned that Adam and Eve's children, will actually crush Satan who had tempted them to do it. This is grace: God has been working for this time of grace, when He will come Himself in the form of His Son, in the form of Jesus, to be lifted up, to die upon the Cross, and to actually enable us to be forgiven, and to receive our salvation. God so loved the world, He loves everybody in the world. It is not just for us nice people who have been saved, it's for everyone to receive of this. God makes this wonderful offer: a gift, an unmerited gift of grace to each one of us, to everyone in the world. All those who have been, to all those who will be, He gave us His gift of grace. "I love you, and I am seeking to bring you into My Kingdom." "God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, so that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life." John continues, it is not to condemn the world, that this is happening. It's to bring people into that relationship of faith and salvation. It's actually to make those connections and to bring us in to be the people who were meant to be: people who have a relationship and a connection with Father God, so that everything will work in our favour, but altered and made present by the work of God.

So I hope over this short time of me talking to have given you some indications about the way in which the grace of God, the unmerited favour and our faith work together. It is, as I say, a very personal experience, from a journey of faith, setting out all those many years ago to preach without faith, but when I found the faith through the grace of God, I actually began to preach faith. And I just hope that you've heard me preach faith tonight.

Well let's kind of round this thing up a little bit better. It seems to me that as the reading continues, that we heard, that we are being called into that relationship with Father God, and it is that it is our faith that actually makes a very real difference. We're told that it is because of our faith, because we believe, those who believe are delivered, spared from condemnation. We don't have to worry any more about that time when people will be called before Father God to be judged. Because in a sense, we brought that judgement right through to this time by simply acknowledging our wretchedness, our need for God, our lack of faith, and by God's grace believing and trusting in the work of Jesus, we're actually brought into salvation, brought into the light.

But there are also those who do not believe, who run from the light, and they will have to face that condemnation, they will have to face that time, at some time in the future, when our Lord returns, their lives then will be weighed in the balance, and God's judgement, God's perfect judgement, will be pronounced. A long while ago (another long-while-ago story from Robert), a long while ago I was at a social function, for my mum's Free Church, it was a faggot and peas evening, and we'd all been eating faggots and peas, and there were many to spare, and being a young man and liking my grub, I was very keen when the seconds came around to say 'yes'. And I was a little bit hesitant when it was presented to me. And I was told immediately, "There are only two sorts of people," the person said, "the quick and the dead." Well, that's a direct quote

4 www.john316.co.uk

from the Apostles' Creed. Or was it the Nicene Creed? The Nicene Creed, I think⁵. In other words, the living and the dead.

C.S. Lewis puts it a little bit better in his book, *The Great Divorce*⁶, because it actually is not about God's demarcation of those sorts of people, but those sorts of people demarcation of themselves. C.S. Lewis says, ultimately, there are only two sorts of people: those who say to God, "Your will be done", and those to whom God says "your will be done"⁷. This question of our faith comes to us, by God's grace and mercy. It's a free gift of free life. We decide in the end who we honour most. Do we say to God, "Your will be done," or do we hear Him say to us, "your will be done." I pray, like, I believe, I seek to say to God, "Your will be done," that you too will join me in that, and that you will know the blessings and the immense power of His grace, by being filled with His Spirit day by day to live your life of faith with Him.

Amen.

[Transcribed by Hamish Blair with help from <https://otter.ai>]

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5 It's both!

6 Various editions, including ISBN 978-0007461233

7 Lewis continues, "All that are in Hell, choose it."