



Service for Personal or Private Use Sunday 26th July 2020

Great and wonderful are your deeds, O Lord God the Almighty!
Just and true are your ways, O King of the nations!
Who will not fear, O Lord, and glorify your name?
For you alone are holy.

I stop. Although I am coming to God who is my heavenly Father, I am also coming to the Sovereign Lord whose works are very great and whose holiness makes angels hide their faces. Before him all nations will one day bow. One day every tongue will confess that he is Lord. As I worship I am standing on holy ground. I only dare to approach because he has invited me, and in his everlasting love offers me mercy. I come in reverence and joy.

Hymn *Meet and right it is to sing* (H&P 501 StF 32)
or *Sing to God new songs of worship* (MP 600)

Read Psalm 105 verses 1 to 11

Most of this Psalm and the next one recall Israel's history, their experiences of God's faithful dealings with them. The themes are set out in verses 3 to 5:

*Glory in his holy name: let the hearts of those who seek the Lord **rejoice!***

***Seek** the Lord and his strength; seek his presence continually!*

***Remember** the wondrous works that he has done; his miracles and the judgments he uttered.*

Pause: think about each of those in turn.

*When you look back over your own life, where can you **now** see that God was at work? What might you have done differently if you had recognized it back then?*

Prayer

Almighty God, loving and holy Father, how great the privilege that is mine to come close to you. How astonishing that I may come with humble boldness to speak with you. Grace and love and mercy come together to make me welcome. I would not dare to approach if it had not been that you invite me. I worship and adore.

The maker of all things, the upholder of all life: you are the source of my being. Though this vast universe is yours, you take notice of me. Amid the crowds who populate this planet, you have time and attention for every individual. For reasons I cannot fathom, I am precious in your sight. I worship and adore.

The warmth of the sunshine speaks to me of the warmth of your love. The brightness of the light speaks of that searching scrutiny that probes my conscience. The beauty of the world around me tells of a God who delights in things beautiful and good. Fruit and crops ripening tell the repeated story of your generous provision. I worship and adore.

I do not come alone. I bring with me the baggage of your gifts received ungratefully, of times when selfishness has dominated my choices, when my words have been hurtful, when my example has caused another to stumble, when my neglect of your Word and of prayer have dulled my sense of your presence. I lay the burden at the foot of the cross.

Cleanse me from what is past failure. Strengthen me for future obedience. Lead me in your ways. Reign within my heart.

For Jesus Christ's sake. **Amen.**

Read Matthew chapter 13 verses 31 to 33 and 44 to 52

An assortment of short parables highlight how often Jesus spoke about God's Kingdom – what the world would be like if God's kingly rule was honoured everywhere and all the time. We have our part to play. We 'seek' as Psalm 105 directed us. We listen to his judgments as we read the Scriptures. We pray for the coming of that Kingdom.

Hymn *What a friend we have in Jesus* (H&P 559 StF 531 MP 746)

Read the hymn again, using the singular –

What a friend I have in Jesus, All my sins and griefs to bear etc.

Read Romans chapter 8 verses 26 to 39

If I was shipwrecked on that famous desert island, and instead of salvaging eight records I was able only to save a single page from my Bible, I think that this is the page I would choose. It has words of comfort, words of hope, words of reassurance, words of challenge... It tells of God's work in my heart and God's ultimate purpose for the creation of which I am so tiny a part. It tells me of the worth God has given to every human soul, even mine. It tells me that nothing, no matter how severe, can separate me from his great love.

Paul is not everybody's favourite author, and 2nd Peter 3 v15-16 tells us that even while the New Testament was being written, folk found him hard going! But after making every allowance, this is surely one of the passages which thrills the heart and sets our prejudices aside – even if only temporarily. Much of the power of this passage is because it has not been written by an arm-chair theologian, but by a man who has proved repeatedly in his own experience, in every hardship and conflict and trial, that God's love had not abandoned him. The catalogue in 2nd Corinthians 11 of all he had suffered for the sake of taking the gospel to as many people as possible lends these verses powerful authority. Experience should never be allowed to create doctrine, but it certainly confirms it and illustrates it.

A famous painting by Turner has the title 'Snow Storm: Steam Boat off a Harbour's Mouth.' He explained the circumstances in which he painted it:

I did not paint it to be understood, but I wished to show what such a scene was like; I got the sailors to lash me to the mast to observe it; I was lashed for four hours, and I did not expect to escape, but I felt bound to record it if I did.

He had been there, and his critics had not. He had experienced it and felt it. Paul had been there and lived through many of the storms of life.

And out of it all he writes: ***I am persuaded that ... nothing in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*** Other translations use words like 'convinced' or 'am sure' or 'certain' or 'absolutely certain' or 'persuaded beyond doubt.' You get the message! He has considered all the evidence and weighed every argument. It has been proved 'beyond reasonable doubt,' as the law-courts have it.

There is only time and space to pick up a few of the hints that he drops in these verses, so that we may draw the same conclusion. In every test, viewed from every angle, he has found the love of God has been holding him, and it will hold us too. Let's use Paul's stepping stones to lead us through all the evidence he had under review.

The Spirit prompts his prayers, even when he doesn't know how or what to pray. There are times when we must simply hand the problems over to God. We don't need to suggest to him what needs doing, or how he might solve our problem. We may even fail to find words to describe our concern, but he knows; he understands. He cares for you.

God is working all things together for good for those who love him. It doesn't always feel like that. But he doesn't qualify it by writing *most* things, or *some* things, or God *sometimes*. But notice that there are two limits set. The first is that it is *God* who is at work: it is not a rule of the universe that

every trouble or difficulty is balanced out by a compensating good. God can turn every ill that befalls his children into a blessing, into an occasion for his glory. The other is that the promise is “for those who love God.” It isn’t for everyone. It isn’t for God’s fair-weather friends, but for those who love him (even with a faint and flickering love).

Like the grit that makes an oyster produce a pearl, so troubles may bring beauty out of difficulty for the believer. Joseph told his brothers (Genesis 50 v20) that although they had meant him harm, God had turned it to good, for the saving of many lives. The deed was evil; but God used it for good. Psalm 119 v71 says something similar: “It was *good for me* that I was afflicted, that I might learn your ways.” When our strength is exhausted we discover his strength remains. When we hit rock-bottom we find that there is still a rock beneath us. Gold is refined in the fires, and so may our faith be (See 1st Peter 1 v6-7 and Job 23 v10)

When Corrie ten Boom was sent to the Concentration Camp she wondered how she could thank God for the fleas that infested her hut. But because of those fleas the guards never ventured inside, and so they never interrupted the little Bible fellowship being held for their fellow-prisoners.

God’s purpose for our lives is to reproduce the character of Jesus in us. To be made in the image of God is to be perfect: that’s why it is a long process to get us back to what we should be. He works to turn us into the image of his Son, to bring us to glory, to present us before his majestic presence spotless and with great joy. Like Magnus Magnusson, he has started so he’ll finish! That is why our trials and troubles and sufferings can never be the end of the story. They may be like the surgeon’s scalpel, which cuts and hurts only to bring healing and wholeness.

A children’s chorus sings “How wonderful to be a part of God’s amazing plan!” *It is, isn’t it.*

If God be for us, who can be against us? When he uses the word “if” he is not doubting; you could phrase it “Since this is the God who is backing us...” Which God? The God who has been made known to us in Jesus Christ. God’s love is the compassion of Christ, embracing the worst among us and restoring the most damaged, giving hope to the despairing and purpose to the lost. Being “for us” is not the same as approving everything I do or preventing me from straying from his ways: it does mean, however, that he won’t give up his plans for my life, and he will welcome me back when I repent. If you were selecting a cricket team, and the last place was a choice between Ben Stokes and me, I hardly need ask who you would choose! Even better, God is for us, on our side.

He did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us. I sometimes see the last minutes of ‘Bargain Hunt’ before the News. I am frequently astonished at the prices people will pay for objects that have no appeal whatsoever to me. Occasionally the News will tell of a painting that has sold for millions of pounds, and I am left wondering why. But somebody sees these things as desirable and valuable, and will spend a fortune on them. And God saw you and me, and decided that through the death of Jesus we were worth rescuing. “The Son of God loved me and gave himself for me.” *For me!* God so loved the world that he gave his only Son... God commends his love to us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us. He will not and cannot let that purchase be wasted and lost.

He is interceding for us: sometimes those words are treated as if they meant that Jesus is pleading with an angry God, trying to persuade him not to condemn us to Hell; as if God needs to be prevented from punishing us. No, a thousand times No! God is for us; he has said so already. The prayers of Jesus are not that we shall be spared God’s wrath, but that the accusations of Satan should be set aside, and that all the riches of God’s grace may be lavished upon us to equip us for God’s service. Since Jesus went to the Cross and its shameful death out of sheer love for us, he won’t give up now.

Nothing: he lines up the candidates. Which of them can separate us from the love of God which has been made known to us in Jesus? He has considered them all. The evidence has persuaded him. In the light of all those facts which Paul has set out for us he is fully convinced of the answer.

Are you?

The work which his goodness began,
The arm of his strength will complete;
His promise is Yea and Amen,
And never was forfeited yet.

Things future nor things that are now,
Nor all things below or above,
Can make him his purpose forgo,
Or sever my soul from his love.

Hymn by A M Toplady *A debtor to mercy alone*

Prayer

Loving Father, nothing can separate me from your love, and nothing can pluck me from my Saviour's hands. In that assurance I pray, knowing that Jesus intercedes for me, and the Holy Spirit translates my ill-formed groans.

I pray with all your people for the coming of your kingdom, for the time when every knee will bow to Jesus, and every tongue will confess that he is Lord. I pray for the time when rebellion against your rule will be ended – not by violent overthrow, but by love's conquest.

I pray that as the country relaxes the lockdown and attempts to resume life in changed conditions, may there be a continuing vigilance against the spread of infection; may those whose jobs have been lost find fresh employment; may those many who have lost loved ones know comfort and help; may those who have worked through the pandemic under great stress find time and space to recuperate; especially may NHS workers at all levels recover their energy and passion. As work continues in the attempt to find vaccines and cures for Covid I pray for workers in the laboratories, that they may be led in the right direction.

I pray for the people for whom life cannot return to the secure and familiar. A loved one has gone; a job has ended; their own health has been damaged, whether by Covid or because other cases took priority; and I pray for those for whom it was a time of moving on – children changing school and students starting or finishing university; ministers changing circuit and churches receiving a new minister.

And in a world torn by inequalities of opportunity and provision, by prejudice of race or nationality or politics, by vulnerability to famine or drought or flood or earthquake, by the mismanagement of resources or power-hungry oppression... Lord, look with pity and with mercy on all our foolish ways.

And lastly I pray for all those – especially those known to me – who doubt or question your love for them, and for those who struggle to find purposes of wise and holy love in all the events of their own lives. May they find that love in the light of the cross.

The Lord's Prayer

Hymn *Love divine, all loves excelling* (H&P 267 StF 503 MP 449)

The hymn *How firm a foundation, ye saints of the Lord* (MP 243) is very suitable, and can be found on Google or U-Tube

The Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,
the love of God,
and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit,
be with us all evermore.

Amen.

Readings for next Sunday: Matthew 14: 13-21; Genesis 32:22-31; Psalm 17:1-7, 15; Romans 9:1-5