

Sunday 04 October 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.80,3-7: "Restore us, O God; make your face shine on us, that we may be saved. How long, LORD God Almighty, will your anger smoulder against the prayers of your people? You have fed them with the bread of tears; you have made them drink tears by the bowlful. You have made us an object of derision to our neighbours, and our enemies mock us. Restore us, God Almighty; make your face shine on us, that we may be saved."

Collect: Almighty God, you created the heavens and the earth, and made us in your image. Teach us to discern your hand in all your works and to serve you with reverence and thanksgiving; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. AMEN

1 Speak, O Lord, as we come to You
to receive the food of Your holy word.
Take Your truth, plant it deep in us;
shape and fashion us in Your likeness,
that the light of Christ might be seen today
in our acts of love and our deeds of faith.
Speak, O Lord, and fulfil in us
all Your purposes, for Your glory.

2 Teach us, Lord, full obedience,
holy reverence, true humility.
Test our thoughts and our attitudes
in the radiance of Your purity.
Cause our faith to rise, cause our eyes to see
Your majestic love and authority.
Words of power that can never fail;
let their truth prevail over unbelief.

3 Speak, O Lord, and renew our minds;
help us grasp the heights of Your plans for us.
Truths unchanged from the dawn of time
that will echo down through eternity.
And by grace we'll stand on Your promises,
and by faith we'll walk as You walk with us.

Speak, O Lord, till Your church is built
and the earth is filled with Your glory.

Keith Getty, Stuart Townend

Jonah 2,1-10

“Now the LORD provided a huge fish to swallow Jonah; and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights. From inside the fish Jonah prayed to the LORD his God. He said:

‘In my distress I called to the LORD, and he answered me. From deep in the realm of the dead I called for help, and you listened to my cry. You hurled me into the depths, into the very heart of the seas, and the currents swirled about me; all your waves and breakers swept over me. I said, “I have been banished from your sight; yet I will look again towards your holy temple.” The engulfing waters threatened me, the deep surrounded me; seaweed was wrapped around my head. . the roots of the mountains I sank down; the earth beneath barred me in for ever. But you, LORD my God, brought my life up from the pit. ‘When my life was ebbing away, I remembered you, LORD, and my prayer rose to you, to your holy temple. Those who cling to worthless idols turn away from God’s love for them. But I, with shouts of grateful praise, will sacrifice to you. What I have vowed I will make good. I will say, “Salvation comes from the LORD.”’

Dear friends

When Jesus, teaching about the kingdom of God (God and faith), drew on the book of Jonah he did so in the middle of a dispute. An argument had come up that needed to be countered because it was deceptive. What was the dispute about? Well, some Pharisee and Sadducees demanded a miraculous sign. “Do yourself a favour and perform a miracle, if you can. That might convince us that you should be listened to, that you might have what’s needed.” It very much sounded like they knew what that was, what, in other words, the times required. But Jesus knew the trouble was they did not: “*You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times. A wicked and adulterous generation looks for a sign, but none will be given it except the sign of Jonah.*” (Mt.16,4) In other words, he was saying: “What the times require is not the power of miracles combining with the rectitude of people like you, righteous in yourselves; no, it is that the opposition be overcome which there is between your will and the will of God.”

The sign of Jonah, then, is not in the first instance about a miracle involving a big fish; it is about the way God sets out to remove the hostility of man towards His will and to make peace, and doing so through judgment and grace.

The crucial matter in the arena of life, what is really going down, is the opposition between these two wills – God’s and ours: That we live in obedience (i.e. in servitude, enslavement) to our own will which is governed by our desires and needs and do not, therefore, serve God and life but sin and death.

A troubled ship in raging seas in the story of Jonah is a metaphor for the threat that issues from God’s judgment as it brings this opposition to light and faces it. The sailors in the story saw that and did something about it. The instinct by which they sought out what was opposing their path was right and proved helpful. [They got the “information” that what was happening was “judgment”!]

Now, a question, hopefully illuminating, that we might ask is: What would a person of our own day do if he were on that ship? Would he see the judgment that is facing him or would he be in denial? Would he admit to the troublesome opposition giving rise to the storm, its nature and effect, and seek to address it, or would he strenuously and self-righteously refuse and carry on? Might he even try to muzzle the mouths of his fellow travellers in order to stop them from asking who was responsible for bringing this trouble over them? Here appear questions we need to take seriously and ask of ourselves. Do we see the judgments of God in the threats to our lives and oppositions to our paths? Do we hear what they signal about our opposition to God's will, about the ways in which we serve sin and death? Do we let them inform us?

Perhaps a reason why we often instinctively recoil from looking in this direction and tend to agree with those who silence all talk of judgment, won't have anything to do with it and consider it entirely negative, is that we think of judgment as being the end and being hopeless. We don't see it in terms of salvation or hope. In fact, when we judge other people it is usually just that – not a new beginning but the end! Which is why Jesus tells us not to judge each other.

Now even though the sailors did not close their eyes to it this is just how they felt about it. Judgment was the end, which is why they tried to keep Jonah alive and find rescue some other way, and why, when that became impossible, they were convinced that they were condemning him to death. They thought that judgment, as it was coming to Jonah, meant the end, not salvation.

But what is the sign of Jonah saying? That they were wrong! Even so: That here is a judgment without which there is no salvation! Jonah was saved, albeit not in the way the sailors thought the only possible one. Jonah was saved not apart from judgment but through it; not apart from death but through it.

It is important that we understand that Jonah surely died. We mustn't think that Jonah only almost died but didn't quite and that the fish God sent indicates as much. No, no. The fish symbolises the power of God's grace to save from death, to lead through judgment to a new beginning. The fact that Jonah prayed to the Lord his God "*from inside the fish*" does not require us to think that therefore Jonah could not have been dead. Rather, it requires us to understand 'the sign': That there is a death, that there is a judgment, where the opposition to God's will is put away, where hostility is brought to an end, where guilt is washed away and sin's hold is broken and where death itself is put to death; and from where life begins anew in calling on God and offering itself to him in "*grateful praise*".

Is this not what the prayer of Jonah "inside the fish" proclaims? "*The engulfing waters threatened me, the deep surrounded me; seaweed was wrapped around my head. To the roots of the mountains I sank down; the earth beneath barred me in for ever. But you, LORD my God, brought my life up from the pit.*" And then: "*Those who cling to worthless idols turn from God's love for them. But I, with shouts of grateful praise, will sacrifice to you. What I have vowed I will make good. I will say, 'Salvation comes from the LORD'.*"

Dear friends, in this song of praise and of God's renewing grace, Jonah as the prophet he is points beyond himself to the God who saves, to the one who as the sinless lamb of God bore God's judgment on all sin and whose death became the death of death and the entrance to life, reconciling to God those who stand in opposition to His will, so they may serve not sin and death but him who died for them and life – even Jesus Christ, the Son of God. In Christ, crucified and risen from the dead, God Himself became that place wherein all hostility ceases and fear must go, where we find shelter and new ways. In calling on his name we are saved, for salvation comes from the Lord. AMEN

There is a hope that burns within my heart,
that gives me strength for every passing day;
a glimpse of glory now revealed in meagre part,
yet drives all doubt away:

I stand in Christ, with sins forgiven,
and Christ in me, the hope of heaven!
My highest calling and my deepest joy,
to make His will my home.

There is a hope that lifts my weary head,
a consolation strong against despair,
that when the world has plunged me
in its deepest pit,

I find the Saviour there!
Through present sufferings, future's fear,
He whispers 'Courage!' in my ear.
For I am safe in everlasting arms
and they will lead me home.

There is a hope that stands the test of time,
that lifts my eyes beyond the beckoning grave,
to see the matchless beauty of a day divine
when I behold His face!

When sufferings cease and sorrows die,
and every longing satisfied,
then joy unspeakable will flood my soul,
for I am truly home.

Stuart Townend / Mark Edwards THANK YOU Music

Lord God, we thank you that by calling on the name of Jesus Christ your Son we are saved. He counted our sins his own and tasted death on our behalf so that we should know your love for us and find grace. Through grace, in your mercy, turn our ways to you in ever greater measure so that we may become what the times require. Fill us with your Spirit, for Jesus' sake.

- 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