

**Sheffield United Reformed Churches
Team Ministry worship for individuals or families on**

**Sunday 14th March 2021 at 10:30 am
4th Sunday in Lent - Mothering Sunday**

Call to Worship

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. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.

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.

Tw'as 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 I have already come;
'Tis Grace that brought me safe thus far and Grace will lead me 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.

Prayer of Praise

Lord, we praise you for the grace that you revealed in Jesus Christ
The grace of his cross, his resurrection, his reign with you
By that grace you show your unfailing and irresistible love to each one of us and to all humanity
By that grace you call each of us to be your children, ransomed, restored, forgiven and healed
By that grace we are united, coming to you with the same privileges, the same rights and on the same basis
By that grace we have passed from condemnation to acceptance
By that grace, you invite us to share in the goodness of your Kingdom - your care, your provision, your guidance
By that grace you generously give your Holy Spirit and send us to share grace with a world lost in hatred, division, difference and judgement
By that grace we will enter into the fullness of the age to come and reign with you over all creation
We stand in awe of that amazing grace!

Readings



Numbers 21: 4-9 – God commands Moses to craft a snake as a sign of healing

Psalms 107: 17-22 - the rebellious are healed when they cry out to God for help

John 3: 14-21 - God loved the world so much that he gave His Son. Whoever believes in Him will pass from death to life.

Ephesians 2, 1-10 - What we were without Christ, what we are in Christ, what we shall be with Christ!

Reflection - A story for Mother's Day...

A village was plagued by a crime wave. Livestock was disappearing, crops were being torn up, houses and property were being damaged. Frustration and anger among the people were running high. Something had to be done. The village Elder declared that the perpetrator must be punished by suffering twenty lashes. Eventually the guilty party was apprehended: the 85 year-old mother of one of the Elder's closest advisers. The villagers were demanding justice but the old woman would never survive the sentence. How could the Elder exercise both justice and mercy?

The village was summoned to the square where the old woman was tied up. The officer stepped forward, flexing his whip ready to execute sentence. As the officer drew back his arm the Elder stepped forward and stood over the woman, shielding her body and taking the lashes of the whip on his own bare back. The twenty lashes lacerated his body but his strength enabled him to soak up the punishment. The people went away satisfied that justice had been done. The woman was cut down and walked home, free, and was handed over to the care of her son.

Ephesians is one of the letters where Paul sets out the themes of the Christian faith in great depth. It is as if Paul is relieved to find a church without any major pastoral concerns. He thinks: "I don't have to spend much time guiding or correcting them; instead, I will use this opportunity to tell them what God has done for us!"

And so Paul sets out the great universal purposes of God and all He has accomplished for us through the death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus. But he doesn't lose sight of ordinary Christians in all the grand sweep of his themes. The Epistle is very pastoral, full of prayers aching for God's people, the Church, to grasp in the depths of their hearts, what God has done for us by His grace. So Paul also tells us how we come to experience this Amazing Grace of God. Let us listen carefully.

Paul tells us what we used to be without Christ. "...dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live...gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts...by nature deserving of wrath" (Ephesians 2, 1-3).

Like Lazarus, we were dead. And like any dead man, unable to help ourselves. Unable to act. We could only wait for someone to come and wake us up from our spiritual stupor. Birth, privilege, nurture, learning, achievement, human recognition, riches, virtue - absolutely nothing can provide a means of escape from this condition. Like the woman in the story we stand guilty in the face of the holy commands we have broken - and the Holy God who gives them.

And the small quantity of our shortcoming (compared to others, perhaps) is no defence. A bride, readying herself for her wedding takes time to write a card of thanks to her mother. As she picks up the pen a spot of ink drops on to her pristine white dress. A tiny spot - but she knows that the dress is ruined. So we are spoiled and deflected from our God-given destiny by sin. Paul describes us as objects of wrath, a concept little-preached-about; a concept rather despised even in the Christian Church (yet we allow ourselves the luxury of getting angry at the most trivial infractions of justice or human convention!). But a Holy God must deal with sin.

Paul tells us what we now are in Christ. "But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus," (Ephesians 2, 4-6).

How I love that "But"! Like Lazarus, we hear the voice of Christ, the Resurrection and the Life, calling us to live! We are made alive in Christ, by grace. The Apostle John records the words of Jesus, reminding Nicodemus that Moses was instructed to craft a bronze snake while the Israelites were in the wilderness, so that anyone who had been plagued by snakes that were overrunning the camp could simply look to it and find healing. In the same way, just as the snake was lifted up on a pole so Jesus would be lifted up on the two cross pieces of a Roman instrument

of execution, and anyone who looked to that great act of mercy could pass from condemnation to acceptance, from death to life! Like the Elder in the story, Jesus has stepped up for us!

The amazing thing to note in Jesus' words is that the snake modelled by Moses was the very thing that was actually plaguing the Israelites. So God's instructions to Moses make a profound point: the very thing that is the source of your malady will also be the source of your healing. So Jesus undergoes suffering, rejection, wrath and death in order to bring grace and life to us! He is pierced for our transgressions; the punishment that was upon him brings us peace with God and by his wounds we are healed (Isaiah 53, 5).

Paul tells us what we will be with Christ. *“And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus...that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ.”* (Ephesians 2, 6-7).

Lazarus hears the words of his own resurrection from the one who is “the Resurrection and the Life”. So where do we go from here? We pass beyond the cross to the garden tomb and find it empty. Because Christ is alive we now have the resources and hope to live a new life. We are now free, like the woman in the story, to go home and find (and give) care and compassion. Paul tells us that God's purpose is to lavish kindness and compassion on us. It is not God's will for us to struggle and squirm through this life, lurching from one crisis to another and scraping through by the skin of our teeth. But we are “seated with Christ in the heavenly realms” which means we have all the benefits and privileges (and indeed the responsibilities) of heavenly royalty. Whatever we think of Harry and Meghan, and whatever the truth of what has been happening, how tragic to see them foregoing their royal status to live a half-life in the shallow glow of the media!

But when? Paul tells us that this “is in the coming ages” implying the future. Undoubtedly, beyond this current age we will experience even more of God's kindness and generous love. But are we not experiencing it now? Are we waiting for God's love to be shown? Surely not! We know it now. The resurrection and Paul's understanding of our position “seated with Christ” is a reminder that we are experiencing a foretaste of the “age to come” in the present. As Paul explains elsewhere: “...we who have the first-fruits of the Spirit groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as God's children...” (Romans 8, 23)

How do we obtain all this? *“...it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's handiwork created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do...”* (Ephesians 2, 8-10)

By grace alone. We can only ask God who is ready to give, freely and generously. This is the foundation of our great Protestant tradition. More than that, it is the truth of the Gospel straight from the oft-maligned Paul. A popular strand of scholarship asserts that he made the simple message of Jesus more complicated than it needed to be! But Ephesians is a wonderful statement, not of what we can do for God but of what God has done for us.

Jesus tells a story in Luke's Gospel (Chapter 18, 9-14) about two people who went up to the Temple to find God's favour (yes, I admit it's a simpler story). One man was full of all the things he had done for God. (We need to stop doing things “on God's behalf” and stop and listen, realising that we ARE his work, fashioned to do work he has prepared for us!). The other person could barely lift his head or voice to God. He needed mercy. He found it. He went home resting in the peace of what God had done for him.

So grace is the basis of everything: the source of our unity, our love, our freedom, our help, our forgiveness; the source of how all these things flow from us to others - and the foretaste of more to come...Amazing grace!

Hymn - R&S 655

When Christ was lifted from the earth, His arms stretched out above
Through every culture, every birth, to draw an answering love.

Still east and west His love extends and always, near or far,
He calls and claims us as His friends and loves us as we are.

Where generation, class, or race divides us to our shame,
He sees not labels but a face, a person and a name.

Thus freely loved, tho' fully known, may I in Christ be free
To welcome and accept His own as Christ accepted me

Prayers of Intercession

Lord God, we pray for our world, for families as they journey together through the years: for the young, starting out to discover what the world has to offer; for the elderly, so rich in the experiences of life. Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer...

We pray for families where there is pain and sorrow: for families where love is fragile, for those in war-torn areas, for communities where famine is an everyday factor. Lord, we pray for our own families. Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer...

Lord, we pray for those who feel alone in this world: for those who have lost loved ones; for those who have left their homes to make their own way in the world; for those locked in prisons; for those locked in illness; for those locked in financial problems. Lord, we pray for those who journey alone. Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

Lord, we prayer for mothers: for our own mothers who carried us in the womb, who fed and cared for us and who continue to worry about us. We pray for mothers who began the journey of life with us: for mothers who are with us no longer. We pray for those unable to be mothers. Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer.

Lord, we prayer for those close to our hearts who are in need... *(Please name them here)*

We pray in the name of Him, who died, who rose again and who is seated at Your right hand, using the prayer He taught us... **The Lord's Prayer**

Hymn

We have a gospel to proclaim: Good news for all throughout all the earth;
The gospel of a Saviour's name: we sing His glory, tell His worth.

Tell of His death at Calvary, hated by those He came to save;
In lonely suffering on the cross for all He loved, His life He gave.

Tell of that glorious Easter morn: empty the tomb, for He was free.
He broke the power of death and hell that we might share His victory.
Tell of His reign at God's right hand, By all creation glorified;
He sends His Spirit on His Church to live for Him, the Lamb who died.

Now we rejoice to name Him King: Jesus is Lord of all the earth.
This gospel message we proclaim: we sing His glory, tell His worth.

Blessing

Let us travel with the blessing of God.
Let us travel on in the fellowship of the Spirit.
Let us travel always with the love of Jesus the Son.
Now and always **Amen.**