

The God we worship

Readings: Deut. 26:1-11, Rom 10:8-13 & Luke 4:1-13

Welcome to the first Sunday in Lent 2016. I wonder what Lent conjures up you? It was always said that Lent was a time for giving things up, especially things we enjoy, as if God were some kind of kill-joy.

I want to be far more radical this morning. I would like to suggest this morning that we give up our small visions of God. God is far greater and more powerful than we have ever realised, He is far more gracious and loving than we have ever experienced or even dreamt of and His goodness and beauty are more breath-taking than we have ever known. And to cap it all, God is far more willing to work in us by His Spirit's power than we have ever thought possible. It is time to give up our small visions of God, not just for Lent but permanently.

Last week we had the reading from Isaiah 6 where Isaiah saw that amazing vision of God, high and lifted up. He was already a prophet of God, but this vision of God was far beyond anything he had known before. He cried out "Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!" (Isaiah 6:5). The self-same response as Job had when he said "I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you; therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes." (Job 42:5-6). God was far bigger and more glorious than these godly Old Testament men realised. It is so easy to limit our view of God.

I want to quote from Elizabeth Singer Rowe, not someone perhaps you have ever heard of, but she had a big view of God. She lived in England at the time of Isaac Watts, about three hundred years ago. After her death Isaac Watts edited her writings and published what became a best seller in its time entitled "*Devout Exercises of the Heart in Meditation and Soliloquy, Praise and Prayer.*" She writes "I long to behold the supreme beauty. I pant for the fair Original of all that is lovely, for beauty that is yet unknown, and for intellectual pleasures yet untasted. Why may I not begin my heaven below, and taste, at least, of the springs of pleasure that flows from thy right hand forever? Should I drink my fill, these fountains are still inexhaustible; millions of happy souls gaze on thy beauty and are made partakers of thy blessedness, but thou art still undiminished. No liberality can waste the store of thy perfection, for it has flowed from eternity and runs forever fresh." Elizabeth Rowe had a big view of God and a deep desire to know Him better.

But I want to turn to our readings because in them I believe, if we dig a little, we will find something more along this theme.

Firstly some Old Testament examples. Deut. 26:1-11 gives us a description of the offering of firstfruits in response to God's covenantal grace.

"And behold, now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground, **which you, O LORD, have given me.**' And you shall set it down before the LORD your God and **worship**

before the LORD your God. And you shall rejoice in all the good that the LORD your God has given to you and to your house, you, and the Levite, and the sojourner who is among you.” (Deut.26: 10-11).

God had been faithful to His promise and brought the people of Israel into the land, so this little ceremony is personalising God’s gift to each Israelite. They are saying in effect “I acknowledge God’s hand leading me and bringing me to this place and giving me this bounty which I enjoy, and the firstfruits I give back to Him as an act of worship. Because God is who He is, I want to recognise that in a personal, public act of worship. In bringing Him the firstfruits, I am putting Him first in my affections.”

At the end of January, at our Vestry meeting, Anne Askin reminded us of the *Shema*. The *Shema* is the great affirmation of Judaism and a declaration of faith in one God – “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.” (Deut. 6:4-5). A Jew is obligated to say *Shema* in the morning and at night (Deut. 6:7). The first line of the *Shema*, "Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One" is repeated throughout the prayer services. It is said in the morning blessings in the synagogue, as a bedtime prayer, as part of the deathbed confessional, and at various other times. The *Shema* therefore acts like a couple of bookends to each day and to life itself. Or to change the metaphor it acts like an anchor to the day, the ship of life is anchored to this truth throughout the day – that there is only one God, in grace He has set His love upon His people and I will love Him with all I am.

The reciting of the *Shema* is an example of the power of repetition. Another one for the practising Jew, is Shabbat or the Sabbath. The Russian Jewish writer Ahad Ha’am said, “More than the Jews have kept Shabbat, Shabbat has kept the Jews.” It is the power of regular repetition of the Shabbat ceremonies reminding the Jew of his roots and his God that has kept the nation over the millenia. We live in an age where something new is the mantra, out with the old in with the new.

However, truth needs to be repeated and repeated often, especially as we are bombarded continually by untruth or half-truths. One of the powerful things about the Anglican way of worship is that we are reminded of God’s truth every time we worship, in our readings and our liturgy. Indeed, one of the keywords in the communion service is “Do this in remembrance of me”. Call to mind what I have done for you as you take the elements of bread and wine - remember. But it is more than mere repetition, it is a partaking with Christ, a longing to know more - to let the words run around our minds and hearts as we consider their meaning for us, for there is yet more we have not seen. Yes, there is a danger of mindless repetition, but knowing the danger, we look out for it, but profit from the repetition of the truth.

Secondly, our reading in Romans 10 reminds us that God’s grace is extended to Jew and Gentile. For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, **bestowing his riches on all who call on him**. For “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.” (Rom. 10:12-13). God bestows His riches on all who call upon Him, the riches of His grace. Let us never belittle or cheapen the grace of God. It came at great price, as Paul says in Ephesians 1 “In

him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight” (v7-8).

You are God’s child by His sovereign grace, which He has lavished upon you. He just didn’t feel sorry for you, He came as a man in Christ Jesus and procured your salvation for you. Though he was in the form of God, he did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. (Phil. 2:6-8). It was while we were yet enemies of God that we were reconciled to Him by the death of His Son. There are riches in God’s grace that we have not yet begun to fathom or appreciate. Matt Redman is one of the foremost modern Christian songwriters and he said “Who on Earth are we that the awesome King of all eternity would spare a thought in our direction? Why would the God of yesterday, today, and forever- the One who was, is, and is to come- choose to bestow His loving attention upon the likes of us? The God of unspeakable glory is speaking to us in unmistakable words of love and grace.”

Thirdly our reading from Luke 4 describes the temptations of Jesus in the wilderness – the challenge of obedience to God or to the evil one. Here is the perfect man facing the onslaught of the evil one.

Where Israel failed to be obedient to God’s word in the wilderness, Jesus walks victorious in the wilderness, fully obedient to the will of God. As Joel Green points out 1) Israel was allowed to hunger in order to learn that man does not live by bread alone; 2) Israel was instructed to worship the One and only God and not to follow after any other god and 3) Israel was commanded not to put the Lord God to the test. In each case, however, Israel failed in their obedience to God, but Jesus the true Son of God walks in complete obedience. Jesus had to fully experience our humanity to be our Saviour – what amazing grace, that He should take on frail flesh. As the writer to the Hebrews said “He had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect, so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people. Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested.” (Heb. 2:17-18). God knows what you are going through, He is not unfeeling, He is present with you by His Spirit.

Jesus conquered because He was “full of the Holy Spirit” (v1), that same Spirit that now dwells within you. We see God’s grace in providing such a Saviour and God’s grace in giving to His people the Holy Spirit. May we never belittle the gift of His Spirit.

Each of these scriptural passages have shown us something of the grace of God towards us. We could summarise in this way:

God has given you your life, you are not here by accident.
God has provided you with all you need for life.

God has, in Jesus, given you a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord. God has not just given you forgiveness of your sins, although that in itself is sufficient to praise Him for all eternity, but God has also in Christ, given you His Spirit to produce in you the life of His Son.

In the light of all that God has done for us, does that not call out a spirit of worship and adoration within you. As Matt Redman said “The revelation of God is the fuel for the fire of our worship.”

The richness of worship.

It's far more than singing songs, it all to do with the heart and the giving of ourselves to God. As Jesus quoted to Satan “You shall worship the Lord your God, and him only shall you serve.” Notice those three words – worship, your God and serve.

God in His grace and mercy has sought us and brought us home; has made us part of the people of God, so that in some amazing way He brings us under His love and protection – He becomes “our God” – the God we owe everything to and the God we worship and adore. And that praise and adoration extends out to the way we serve Him, it's exclusive – we serve only Him. So worship is something that our whole life should proclaim.

Paul picks up the same theme in Romans 12 v1 “I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.” We need to remember that this verse comes after eleven chapters of Paul expounding the riches of God's grace and mercy to us. In the light of all you have understood of God, says Paul, let your very lives be a lived out in worship to God, let every breath, let every action be one of worship to God alone – for He alone is worthy of all worship.

So as we begin this season of Lent, may we enlarge our grasp of the greatness of the God we worship. Amen.