



Personal service 24 January 2021

For God alone my soul waits in silence,
for my hope is from him.
He alone is my rock and my salvation,
my fortress; I shall not be shaken.
On God rests my deliverance and my honour;
my mighty rock, my refuge is in God.

Psalm 62, v. 5-7

StF 254/ HP 138 / MP 590 Seek ye first the kingdom of God

Prayer of approach:

Thank you, scandalous God,
for giving yourself to the world
not in the powerful and extraordinary
but in weakness and the familiar:
in a baby; in bread and wine.

Thank you for offering, at journey's end, a new beginning;
for setting, in the poverty of a stable,
the richest jewel of your love;
for revealing, in a particular place,
your light for all nations...

Thank you for bringing us to Bethlehem, House of Bread,
where the empty are filled,
and the filled are emptied;
where the poor find riches,
and the rich recognize their poverty;
where all who kneel and hold out their hands
are unstintingly fed. *Kate Compston 1990*

Old Testament reading: Jonah 3: 1-5, 10.

Gospel: Mark 1: 14-20.

StF 372/ HP 281 /MP 89 Come down, O Love divine.

Reflection

The story of Jonah illustrates some of the perils of religion, especially that of wanting to be right, and thinking that my version of God is correct, and others are wrong. It hooks into our fears and insecurities, and can hinder us from discovering a life-giving God of limitless love and compassion. This can leave us stuck with the kind of God we think we want, who fits in with our rules and our culture - a God whom we can control.

The book of Jonah ends with a question from God which is not answered. It is a challenge to Jonah's small view of God, and also to Jonah's self-righteous view of himself. God's concern for the Ninevites is the same as God's concern for Jonah - this is not the partisan, exclusive God that Jonah thinks he wants.

This story is full of deception and attempts by the prophet to pretend that the truth is not what it is. He tries to escape from God's call by taking a ship in the opposite direction to that which he should have been taking. He tries to deceive God and himself, but is not allowed to get away with it. There is a storm at sea, and Jonah freely acknowledges that he is the cause because of his disobedience. He asks the sailors to throw him overboard to save their own lives. Jonah asks God for punishment, and instead receives mercy and the opportunity for a fresh start, which he finds hard to accept from God. Experience doesn't seem to change Jonah or his attitude to other people. The second time round he does what he's told when he is spewed out by the big fish on the shore: he walks to Nineveh and gives it to them straight - 'In forty days Nineveh will be overthrown!'

But he is not prepared for the fact that the people will take him seriously. Jonah's message is brief and stark, and has the effect of making them look at themselves. Whatever their particular wickedness was, the people of Nineveh respond in a public ritual of repentance, donning sackcloth and ashes. The king of Nineveh is actively involved. He declares a fast, and orders the people to show signs of penitence, to pray to God, and to abandon their wicked ways and unjust practices. He seems to engage deeply with the question 'Who is this God, and what is God's nature?' He is not prepared to accept Jonah's threat as God's last word; he introduces the possibility that Yahweh might relent, change his mind, and turn away from his anger. The king dares to imagine that human action can make a difference to God, that God has the freedom to act in a different way, rather than being some impersonal, implacable force. He has rightly discerned that the character of God is to respond in mercy and grace to the efforts and longings of human beings. Jonah is angry!

When Jesus comes into Galilee at the beginning of Mark's gospel, he is proclaiming God's good news. He declares that it is happening now, and demands repentance in response to God's action in the world. Jesus goes for a walk by the Sea of Galilee, and calls Simon and Andrew, and then James and John, to follow him, and learn to become people who will draw others into a way of being which expresses God's good news for humanity. We have no clue why these particular people were chosen, or what made them respond without hesitation. Jesus' call is simple, and the fishermen's response is immediate, like the Ninevites. They are apparently prepared to give up a secure occupation for something vague, with an unknown outcome. They don't know what is involved, or what Jesus' mission is about. They all leave their fishing nets, but as we read the gospels, it seems as though James and John in particular are frequently perplexed by

Jesus and what he demands of them. They cannot leave their old attitudes so easily. None of the disciples knows where it will all lead, and they will all abandon Jesus at his moment of crisis, and run away.

Responding to the good news of God in Christ is a life's work, and takes place at different levels at different times. The good news is always the message of God's love and mercy, though it is sometimes experienced as judgement. It always tells us of an opportunity for repentance and a fresh start, a second chance. It always tells us that our human purpose is to grow in love, to become more like Jesus.

Prayers of Intercession

Generous and compassionate God, we offer ourselves and the complexities of our lives, with the challenges of each day. We ask that you will be present in our thinking and planning, in our concerns and anxieties. Help us to lay down our fear, open our hearts and the eyes of our soul to your reality in the world, and help us to see what action is ours to take, to make a difference. Lord, hear us and inspire us.

God of love, we pray for our world. We remember the people of the United States, at this time of turbulence and change. We pray for all who are working for understanding and justice, for all who are listening to others, all who trying to find avenues for hope. We pray for those who are finding change difficult, those who are hurt or disappointed.

Lord, have mercy.

Gracious God, we pray for all who are coping with Covid, for exhausted NHS staff, workers in care homes, and all involved in rolling out the vaccination programme. We remember all who are suffering from the virus, at home or in hospital, and those who are worried that they may not be able to get the treatment they need for other conditions.

Lord, have mercy.

God of love, we pray for countries whose resources for coping with the virus are limited, with inadequate medical supplies. We pray for those in war zones, in refugee camps, in prisons.

Lord, have mercy.

God of compassion and hope, we pray for our loved ones, and for all those known to us who are sick or anxious or sorrowing.

We offer all our prayers in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Lord's Prayer.

StF 359/ HP 532 Lord Christ, we praise your sacrifice

When hope invites us to journey

elusive, beckoning onward
but never in our grasp:

**God of wisdom and promise
give us courage to travel on.**

When dreams glimmer in the distance,
fading, clouded and hidden
or shining with new brightness:

**God of wisdom and promise
give us courage to travel on.**

When established patterns collapse
into the uncertainty of the unknown
and security dissolves into a memory:

**God of wisdom and promise
give us courage to travel on.**

When the illusion of success
threatens to divert us
and silence our souls' yearning:

**God of wisdom and promise
give us courage to travel on.**

When we think our journey has ended
in the star-lit glow

only to find the end is a new beginning:

**God of wisdom and promise
give us courage to travel on.**

Jan Berry