

## LETTING LITURGY LIVE: GOD'S MERCY

I'll start this with a story.

In a high Anglican church, there was once a vicar whose microphone wasn't turned on. At the time of saying "The peace of the Lord be with you", realising he wasn't being amplified, he simply muttered "There's something wrong with this microphone". To which the congregation readily answered "And also with you."

It is the nature of small, repeated sentences to lose their meaning and to be said on autopilot as it were. This is the case just as much for the secular life as it is for liturgy – we sometimes say "How are you", or, in Coventry (and I'm going to get in trouble for my enunciation) "a'ite?" without waiting for an honest answer to the question. Where, in secular life, the matter at hand is somewhat trivial, the same cannot be said about the little snippets that we say in response throughout the service. So, today, continuing in the series on liturgy, I will be focusing on the one-liners of the order of service: the responses that we don't have that much time to think upon as we say them.

"Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayers". "Lord hear us, Lord graciously hear us". "This is the word of the Lord – thanks be to God". Just a few minutes ago: "Hear the Gospel of our Lord according to Saint John – Glory to you O Lord"; and right after the reading, "This is the Gospel of the Lord" - "Praise to you O Christ". These sentences punctuate the service almost as much as Amen punctuates our prayers, and they have become a habit, although a somewhat convoluted one: when the reader has only said "the Gospel reading can be found on page 1010" and has omitted "Hear the Gospel of our Lord according to ...", I sometimes catch myself thinking "oh, naughty, he hasn't prefaced the reading properly". But that's silly of me, because in this case, the statements are, simply, equivalent – it is just a matter of punctuation, as it does not allow us to respond smoothly "Glory to you O Lord".

But our responses to Gospel prefaces and all the other short things we say, the ones that I listed earlier, they're more than mere punctuation. They are bold statements about God and about our relationship with Him; and particularly, for a lot of them, about God's merciful nature. So, through the passages we just read together, and through the liturgy, today, we will be looking at just that: God's mercy. But not as a theoretical, immutable attribute of God – but as a revealed and intimately personal one. For this is what I believe is expressed in the passages, and I believe this is what liturgy in general aims to do: make universal truths about God personal.

The Genesis passage we have heard talks about Abraham receiving such a revelation. He hears the promise from God: "I will make your name great and you will be a blessing". This is the first surprise here: the reading today directly follows the story of the tower of Babel (and a genealogy) – so I wouldn't expect God to be too pleased with mankind; and we hear nothing about how Abram might have deserved this. Undeserved, unearned, but freely given: this blessing itself is what we might call grace; and this is definitely related to God's mercy. But what we see in the passage is not a change of station of Abram. The blessing – everything turning out great for Abram – is not what we hear. We witness a promise. In the passage we have just heard, Abram is obtaining new knowledge. Knowledge about his future, but, crucially, through this, knowledge about his relationship with God.

"I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you"  
"I will make your name great and you will be a blessing"  
"I will bless those who bless you"

Notice how often God says "I"? Abram is not simply blessed, he is blessed by God. This assurance of God's grace will later play an important part. We see its first display in Abram's immediate obedience to leave his country, as instructed; but also in a later story about Abraham.

This is a part of his story that's always puzzled me: 6 chapters later, in Genesis 18, Abraham intercedes for Sodom and Gomorrah. Intercession in itself is something we got used to – even though it is a privilege to be able to come to God with prayer. But the way this is described is as far removed from what we do when we pray that it is surprising: Abraham appears to be bargaining with God, telling him to spare the city for the sake of 50 righteous people, then repeatedly getting that number down to 10. Without getting too much into the specifics of this part of Abraham's story, as it is not the set reading for today, let me point out two things: firstly, that Abraham's plea for mercy is not made as someone who can lay a claim to the sparing of the two cities. Abraham is utterly dependent on God's good will – and rightly so! Secondly, mercy is not sought on the off chance that God might have a change of heart. What Abraham is doing in his intercession is boldly asserting that sparing Sodom and Gomorrah for the sake of the righteous is within God's nature.

In proclaiming this, Abraham does not get above his station. He is simply displaying his knowledge of God's character; and this is something that we do, every week that we go for communion, in the Prayer of Humble Access. We start this prayer with the lines “We do not presume to come to this your table, trusting in our own righteousness, but in your manifold and great mercy”.

Mercy.

Mercy is at the heart of much of our service, and rightly so, for it is also at the heart of the Gospel; and particularly towards the end of the Gospel reading for today: “For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.” This declaration of mercy and salvation is the culmination of Jesus's teaching, in what we have read, about God's relationship with us – that we must be born again of the Spirit.

But proclaiming God's mercy requires that we know of it first, and that we know it personally too. Abraham's story starts with a revelation from God. We must be born again of the Spirit.

In addition, today's service is a service of the word, centred around Scripture; and all the services, including communion services, are also centred around it. Now, in this 9.30 service, scriptural readings are surrounded with liturgy. “Thanks be to God”, “Glory to you O Lord” and “Praise to you O Christ” are sentences we say or mutter in the service.

Thanking God, glorifying Him and praising Him (three different things), but to what end? There are many answers, of course – because there are many things to praise God for. But in the context of Biblical readings, we are thanking God for giving us His word to teach us and edify us; glorifying Him before reading the Gospel in order to have the right attitude before hearing the Gospel; and praising Him after finding out about His merciful nature through the Gospel.

The knowledge, the assurance of God's mercy allows us to boldly come in His presence and praise Him not just for His glory, but also for two other things: His mercy, our new identity in the light of this mercy. This mercy, which is made possible through the Cross, which we know intellectually through Scripture and in our hearts through the Holy Spirit. All this is embedded into our response to the Gospel: “Praise to you O Christ”.

This knowledge should be foremost in our minds in the prayers of penitence, when we seek God's mercy. Like Abram at Sodom and Gomorrah, we can come to God seeking mercy in the knowledge that He will grant it for the sake of one righteous man in whom we are hidden.

The alternative is to be like Nicodemus, unable to understand God's bountiful gift to us, “not accepting Jesus's testimony” even though we claim to profess that he is a “teacher who has come from God”. The alternative is to go through our prayers of penitence without any expectation of release, and where the words of absolution proclaimed later on mean nothing to us. The alternative is to not know God and to feel miserable when recollecting our sins.

Next week, when we say “Lord have mercy” therefore, let us do so boldly, in the knowledge that God indeed has mercy. Trusting not in our own righteousness, knowing our sins, bringing them to mind, and knowing ourselves not deserving of God's mercy – for if it were deserved, it would not, after all, be mercy – but knowing we can bring them before the throne of God, with contrite hearts.

Again, we find in the liturgy an in our relationship with God this three-part movement: God blesses us through the revelation of His word, and calls in us a response of contriteness, but not self-centred contriteness; rather one that is directed to God who is invited to take over with His mercy.

God first, our response, directed at God: this is what our lives should look like, in mercy, in penitence and in faith.