

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

It's beginning to look a lot like Christmas. The decorations are up, the cobwebs are down, and in a few moments the last of the purple candles on the Advent wreath will be lit. It will, of course, be a very different Christmas this year as our civil leaders keep telling us; but that needn't dampen our spirits – whether or not we get to enact in their entirety the annual rituals both here and at home which remind us of what happened one fateful night in Bethlehem, the 24th and 25th of December will still be for us the time of our annual remembrance that the Word became flesh and dwelt among us; and we pray that our faith may be born afresh – that we may yet marvel at the magnificence of this thing which God has brought to pass. While it has undoubtedly been a very strange year, I would nevertheless encourage each of us to take the time between now and Christmas to reflect on the year that has been, and to perceive those moments when God has been good to us, even if (and more probably when) we haven't been very good to God or our neighbour – those moments, to borrow a turn of phrase from John Newton, of Amazing Grace.

These moments of divine grace in your life may not be as dramatic as surviving 11 hours at the wheel of a ship caught in a violent tempest in the Northern Atlantic, but nevertheless, I am certain that they are an experience we all share. If nothing else, you can be thankful that after today there won't be any more sermons based upon the Advent collects from the Book of Common Prayer. But, on that note, I mentioned John Newton's hymn Amazing Grace before because grace is what the traditional Prayer Book collect for the Fourth Sunday in Advent is all about. It goes like this:

O Lord, raise up your power and come among us, and with great might succour us, that, whereas through our sins and wickedness we are sore let and hindered in running the race that is set before us, your bountiful grace and mercy may speedily help and deliver us...

If you're familiar with Newton's hymn, you will be aware that it contains sentiments which bear more than a passing resemblance with those of this collect. Indeed it's right there in the first verse:

*Amazing grace! (how sweet the sound) That sav'd a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now am found; was blind but now I see.*

And so it goes on. Newton acknowledges time and again his utter dependence upon the grace of God – that his own efforts were as nothing if he had not the grace of God. John Newton acknowledged that, by virtue of his humanity, he was “sore let and hindered” and could not save himself from the grip of sin. As I have said before from this pulpit, these are not very popular sentiments in the 21st century Western world. In fact, while the hymn “Amazing Grace” remains as popular as ever, the theological acknowledgement of one's falling short – expressed vividly by the words “saved a wretch like me” are often replaced by bland self-affirming alternatives. The idea that there is something deeply flawed about our humanity runs contrary to the prevailing cultural zeitgeist that we are all perfectly fine just the way we are, *thank you very much*.

Modern man, it seems, has no need of God's grace. As Robert Green Ingersoll, a nineteenth century writer and proponent of the "freethought" movement, suggested – for all the blessings which we enjoy, "man is indebted to man".

As humans, the way we make sense of things is by incorporating events into narratives. Robert Ingersoll lived within a narrative of progress – the idea that the forces of reason which had been unleashed at the enlightenment would necessarily lead to things progressively getting better until we arrive at some sort of man-made utopia – a vision of the kingdom of God, but without God. John Newton, who lived a century before Ingersoll, also lived within a narrative – a narrative which was, and continues to be, shared with the all the descendants of Abraham. It is the great scriptural narrative of the sovereign purposes of God – the story of creation, sin, election, slavery, exodus, covenant, rebellion, exile, and – for Christians at least – Redemption and final consummation. First century Jews very much conceived of themselves not only as living *inside* this great narrative of the sovereign purposes of God, but that the narrative was inevitably approaching its climax.

One evening, more than five centuries before Jesus of Nazareth was born, the Prophet Daniel sat meditating upon the word of the prophet Jeremiah. Daniel writes in his own book of prophecy that he "perceived in the books the number of years that, according to the word of the LORD to the prophet Jeremiah, must be fulfilled for the devastation of Jerusalem, namely, seventy years." Daniel records how he confessed the sin of Israel at length and pleaded for God to restore Israel and the "desolated sanctuary" of the Temple which had been destroyed by the Babylonians. And then, something strange happened – at the time of the evening sacrifice, Daniel found himself face to face with the Angel Gabriel. He recorded how Gabriel told him that it wasn't 70 years that Israel would have to wait, but "70 weeks of years" – that is, 490 years. But wait, there's more. In the First Temple the Glory of the Lord had dwelt in the Holy of Holies; but when the 70 weeks of years were up, there wouldn't simply be a return to the status quo as it had existed during the period of the First Temple. No, Gabriel told Daniel that at the end of the 70 weeks of years the transgression would be finished, sin would be ended, iniquity would be atoned for, and then the great promises of the prophets would be fulfilled: God would intervene and intervene decisively with a second great act of divine deliverance which would eclipse even the Exodus from Egypt. As the New Testament scholar N.T. Wright has noted, no one really knew where precisely to start counting the 490 years from, but nonetheless "Each generation hoped that the divine arithmetic would work in their favour".

It is against this backdrop of hopeful expectation that we must understand what happens in the first chapter of Luke's Gospel. At the turn of what we now call the first century, there would have been a palpable sense that the long awaited "second Exodus" was nigh at hand, that the "seventy weeks of years" were due to be up at any moment. And then it happened. The Angel Gabriel, the very same messenger who had revealed to Daniel the true meaning of Jeremiah's prophecy, is sent forth by God to announce a fresh act of divine grace. He declares to Mary that she will bear a son, despite the fact that she is a virgin; that God will give to this child 'the throne of his ancestor David'; and that 'he will reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and of his kingdom there will be no end'. Mary's initial response is, understandably, one of bewilderment - What? Me? Are you sure? No, you're pulling my leg, come on. But when Gabriel is insistent, she accepts her divine

commission with those fateful words: “Be it unto me according to your word.” But is three months later – presumably having meditated upon the Angel’s Annunciation – that the Blessed Virgin Mary, while visiting her cousin Elizabeth, mother of John the Baptist, that she extols the greatness of God in the song that we today know as the Magnificat. praise to God – the song which we know as the Magnificat. It is an amazing song of immense theological depth which foreshadows much of Jesus’ own teaching concerning the kingdom of God, especially in the emphasis on the humiliation of the proud and the exaltation of the humble. However, it’s the final two verses of Mary’s song to which I wish to draw your attention this morning:

He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants for ever.

The point is that God is faithful, even if Israel (or we) are not. God will honour his covenant – the promises that he made to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and David – even if Israel (or, again, if we) behave like a bunch of wretched, idolatrous, apostates. It was recently pointed out to me that Israel – the patriarch from whom God’s people take their name – was far from a model of exemplary behaviour. Jacob cheated his brother, Esau, out of his birthright, he cheated his uncle Laban out of flocks and herds, and his sexual ethics would make even the most liberal moderns blush with incredulity. And yet, despite all this, for the sake of the promise that God made to Abraham, he blessed Jacob. And despite the fact that Israel, after the example of their namesake, failed to live according to the Law which He had given them; nevertheless, the Lord never forsook his covenant. The grace of God really is Amazing, and it has never been more important for God’s people to recognise this fact. We may marvel at humanity’s ability to produce a vaccine to a pandemic illness in less than 12 months; and yet, for all this, empires still rise and fall, and with them the fortunes of men. Poverty, adultery, rape, murder, suicide – all these and many other scourges expose that for all our achievement, we remain sinners by our nature. No matter how hard we try, humankind will find that without the grace of God the age of peace, love, and justice remains but a fantasy.

The New Testament scholar Joel Green notes that ‘The Gospel of Luke narrates the long-awaited intervention and determined activity of God to accomplish his historic purpose.’ But Green also notes that the divine aim which Luke recounts does not reach its resolution by the end his gospel, nor even by the end of part-two of Luke’s dual treatise, the Acts of the Apostles, nor has it yet been achieved in its entirety. God has acted, and acted decisively, in the incarnation: as Isaiah promised, the virgin conceived and brought forth Emmanuel – God with us. Nevertheless, we know that we too, like Israel of old, are still living inside the great scriptural narrative of the sovereign purposes of God. We still have our part to play as heralds of the kingdom. Our ministry should be one of God’s reign of justice, peace, and love breaking into our present reality in tangible acts of compassion. We will never attain perfection – we will remain sore let and hindered in running the race that is set before us – but God is faithful, and if we but trust in Him, He will give us the grace to achieve that which He has entrusted to us.

So, as we await the fulfilment of our hope, let us, like Mary, be always open to God’s purposes for us. May our reply to God be always that of Mary: be it unto me according to thy word.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.