

Sunday 22 January 2011

10 a.m.

Laurieston Parish Church  
Morning Worship

Welcome/Notices

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Introit: (MP 94: vv 1 & 4)

Come, let us sing of a wonderful love,  
tender and true;  
out of the heart of the Father above,  
streaming to me and to you:  
Wonderful love  
dwells in the heart of the Father above.

Come to my heart, O thou wonderful love,  
come and abide,  
lifting my life till it rises above  
envy and falsehood and pride;  
seeking to be  
lowly and humble, a learner of thee.

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Call to Worship:

**Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all you nations!**  
**Serve the Lord with gladness!**  
**Come into his presence with singing!...**  
**For the Lord is good;**  
**his steadfast love endures for endures for ever**  
**and his faithfulness to all generations.**

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**HYMN**(CH3 #2):

Before Jehovah's awesome throne,  
Ye nations, bow with sacred joy;  
Know that the Lord is God alone;  
He can create, and he destroy.

His sovereign power, without our aid,  
Made us of clay, formed us of old;  
And, when like wandering sheep we strayed;  
He brought us back into his fold.

We are his people, we his care –  
Our souls, and all our mortal frame,  
What lasting honours shall we rear,  
Almighty Maker, to thy Name?

We'll crowd thy gates with thankful songs,  
High as the heavens our voices raise;  
And earth, with her ten thousand tongues,  
Shall fill thy courts with sounding praise.

Wide as the world is thy command,  
Vast as eternity thy love;  
Firm as a rock thy truth must stand,  
When rolling years have ceased to move

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**Talk to the Children**

- ◆ cleaner didn't manage in this week: need some help
- ◆ separate agreement with three children: one to sweep the whole church; one to clean all the brasses; one to dust the piano; each told separately that they will be paid £10
- ◆ ask how they feel: (a) when they first get their contract; (b) when they hear what the others are getting.

- ◆ 'it's not fair': usually when we are getting a raw deal; when we think that we deserve more than someone else
- ◆ much more unusual for person with more to say 'not fair'
- ◆ some things we can do to make the world a fairer place: e.g. eat Fair Trade banana
- ◆ Jesus told a story very like the one I've just told you - three men, all paid the same amount for different lengths of day
- ◆ His message was that God's love isn't something that can be measured - more than enough to go round
- ◆ if God has been good to you, you can be happy about that, and be happy too that he has been good to other people
- ◆ no need to be jealous - there's plenty love to go around

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**LET US PRAY:**

Loving God, you know how easy it is to get upset when someone else seems to have more than we do. We go in the huff and say, 'it's not fair'. Sometimes things really aren't fair, and then it's good to get angry and do something about it - like eating Fair Trade biscuits and bananas. But when it comes to your love, there's no need to be angry or jealous; you have more than enough love for everyone. You love all your children equally; so please help us to do the same. And hear us now as we say the prayer that all your people all over the world will be saying today:

Our Father, who art in heaven,  
 Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come.  
 Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.  
 Give us this day our daily bread  
 And forgive us our trespasses (*debts*)  
 as we forgive those who trespass against us. (*our debtors*)  
 And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil,  
 For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory for ever. AMEN

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**HYMN (JP 139):**

Jesus' love is very wonderful (x3). Oh, wonderful love!  
It's so high you can't get over it; so low you can't get under it;  
so wide you can't get round it. Oh, wonderful love!

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- ◆ brief introduction to reading (summary of story so far)

**O.T. Reading:** Jonah 4: 1-11 Jonah's anger & God's mercy p.896  
Jonah was very unhappy about this and became angry. So he prayed, "Lord, didn't I say before I left home that this is just what you would do? That's why I did my best to run away to Spain! I knew that you are a loving and merciful God, always patient, always kind, and always ready to change your mind and not punish. Now then, Lord, let me die. I am better off dead than alive." The Lord answered, "What right do you have to be angry?" Jonah went out east of the city and sat down. He made a shelter for himself and sat in its shade, waiting to see what would happen to Nineveh. Then the Lord God made a plant grow up over Jonah to give him some shade, so that he would be more comfortable. Jonah was extremely pleased with the plant. But at dawn the next day, at God's command, a worm attacked the plant, and it died. After the sun had risen, God sent a hot east wind, and Jonah was about to faint from the heat of the sun beating down on his head. So he wished he were dead. "I am better off dead than alive," he said. But God said to him, "What right do you have to be angry about the plant?" Jonah replied, "I have every right to be angry - angry enough to die!" The Lord said to him, "This plant grew up in one night and disappeared the next; you didn't do anything for it and you didn't make it grow - yet you feel sorry for it! How much more, then, should I have pity on Nineveh, that great city. After all, it has more than 120,000 innocent children in it, as well as many animals!"

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## **LET US PRAY:**

God, we know you as faithful and loving, generous and compassionate; always ready to forgive when there is the least sign of openness on our part. But we know from the Bible that you are also a jealous God - one who will tolerate no rivals.

And from your prophets and especially from the life of Jesus Christ, your son, we know that nothing makes you more angry than injustice - poor people being exploited by those with wealth and power; ordinary people being ignored by those who think they are more important.

So we are right to be angry whenever we see injustice in our world today. We should be angry about bankers' bonuses; concerned about benefit cuts; ashamed of the exploitation of the people who grow the tea and coffee, sugar and fruit that we enjoy. We should be incensed about the ever-widening gap between rich and poor in the world and in our own society.

Lord, we confess that we are not as angry as we should be about the things that really matter - angry enough to take action that would make a difference. And we also have to confess that, like Jonah, we often get in a strop about petty things that do not matter at all: a tree that springs up overnight and disappear; a chance remark or thoughtless action that takes on huge proportions in our minds.

We compare ourselves, not to those who have less, but those who have more than we have. And while we say the right words about wanting the church to grow, really we are quite happy sometimes to have you all to ourselves, and for nothing very much to change.

Lord God, if the story of Jonah, and the story of Jesus tell us anything, it is that you are a God of boundless compassion: one whose love exceeds all the limits that we, in our anxiety, try to put upon it.

You do not just love us when we are good; if anything you love us more when our lives are in chaos, and we are ready to admit that we need your help. Your love is not just for Christians, or religious people; what matters is how we live our lives in the world outside this place, not what we say on a Sunday morning.

Gracious God, we are privileged to be part of your church: to have heard the message of Jesus, and been called into his service; but we know, like the good religious people whom he encountered and to whom he had such hard words to say, that we are also those at most risk of getting everything horribly wrong: judging other people; thinking we are better than them; underestimating the radical nature of your love and your welcome for all.

So help us here today, to be open to your word; and open to your grace; to know your love - its height and breadth, its length and depth - though it can never fully be known, and so be filled with the very nature of God, through Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN.

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**HYMN 187:** There's a wideness in God's mercy

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**N.T. Reading:** Matthew 20: 1-16 Workers in the vineyard p. 29  
"The Kingdom of heaven is like this. Once there was a man who went out early in the morning to hire some men to work in his vineyard. He agreed to pay them the regular wage, a silver coin a day, and sent them to work in his vineyard. He went out again to the marketplace at nine o'clock and saw some men standing there doing nothing, so he told them, "You also go and work in the

vineyard, and I will pay you a fair wage.' So they went. Then at twelve o'clock and again at three o'clock he did the same thing. It was nearly five o'clock when he went to the marketplace and saw some other men still standing there. "Why are you wasting the whole day here doing nothing?' he asked them. "No one hired us,' they answered. "Well, then, you go and work in the vineyard,' he told them. "When evening came, the owner told his foreman, "Call the workers and pay them their wages, starting with those who were hired last and ending with those who were hired first.' The men who had begun to work at five o'clock were paid a silver coin each. So when the men who were the first to be hired came to be paid, they thought they would get more; but they too were given a silver coin each. They took their money and started grumbling against the employer. "These men who were hired last worked only one hour,' they said, "while we put up with a whole day's work in the hot sun - yet you paid them the same as you paid us!" "Listen, friend,' the owner answered one of them, "I have not cheated you. After all, you agreed to do a day's work for one silver coin. Now take your pay and go home. I want to give this man who was hired last as much as I gave you. Don't I have the right to do as I wish with my own money? Or are you jealous because I am generous?" And Jesus concluded, "So those who are last will be first, and those who are first will be last."

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**N.T. Reading:** Ephesians 3: 14-20 The Love of Christ p. 242  
For this reason I fall on my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth receives its true name. I ask God from the wealth of his glory to give you power through his Spirit to be strong in your inner selves, and I pray that Christ will make his home in your hearts through faith. I pray that you may have your roots and foundation in love, so that you, together with all God's people, may have the power to understand how broad and long, how high and deep, is Christ's love. Yes, may you come

to know his love - although it can never be fully known - and so be completely filled with the very nature of God. To him who by means of his power working in us is able to do so much more than we can ever ask for, or even think of: to God be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus for all time, forever and ever! Amen.

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**Sermon:** Superabundant Grace

How the world has changed! It used to be if you said you were a banker, people would think, "Here's someone I can trust". A bit dull, perhaps; not going to set the world on fire, but reliable; a safe pair of hands... good old Captain Mainwaring, or the bank manager in the cupboard in the old advertisements.

Now it is entirely different, because of the way a few people have abused their power, with the connivance and encouragement of a great many more, who weren't going to rock a boat that was bringing in such vast cargoes of money, in seemingly endless supply.

I caught a discussion on the radio - it may have been Any Questions yesterday - about bankers' bonuses. One person said angrily that these men were civil servants, and should be earning no more than £200,000 p.a. (as though that were nothing!). And the chairman suggested that perhaps they shouldn't be getting any bonuses at all - just their 'basic' salary of £1.2 million!

There are some injustices that it is right and necessary to get angry and complain about. And that includes those where we are on the 'up' side of the seesaw, as well as the 'down'. I have no problem at all getting angry about someone who earns 10, or 50 or 100 times what I do, and seems to do little to deserve it. But if



I see a pair of trousers in Tesco for £5, I'm likely to think "what a great bargain" and snap them up, not ask questions about the people in India or China who made the trousers, and whether they are getting anything like a fair wage for their work.

There are times when it is absolutely right for us to come out with the child's perennial cry, "It's not fair!" Not as a petulant whine, but with the voice of God's authority, as Jesus did, and so many of the prophets. "This is NOT FAIR.... or right, or just, and it WILL NOT DO!" "Leave all your church meetings and services; go and sort out what happens in the market-place, and then come back and worship the God who, if he has any preferences among his children, has always shown a bias to the poor and exploited.

That, however, is entirely different from the cries of unfairness that we heard in two of our readings this morning.

"It's not fair", says Jonah, when he finally goes to Nineveh (having tried to run away in the opposite direction, with disastrous results). "It's not fair, God. You said you were going to punish them; you sent me all this way to tell them you were going to destroy them, and now you turn all merciful. It's just typical of you - I knew that was what you would do. It's not fair!"

And he goes into a mega-sulk; finds a place to sit on the edge of the city, feeling sorry for himself. The sun is getting hotter and hotter, and the little shelter he has made isn't keeping him cool, so he is delighted when a plant springs up (a bit like 'Little Weed' in Bill and Ben). Then the plant withers and dies as quickly as it appeared; he's in the full heat of the sun, and he goes into a sulk again. "It's not fair!", he complains.

In Jewish tradition, the whole book of Jonah (only a few pages long) is read on the great festival of Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement - the holiest day of the year. It's read in the afternoon for a bit of light entertainment; comic relief for the children. Because Jonah is a truly COMIC figure. There was a real prophet Jonah. He's mentioned in 2 Kings, and very little is known about him. But this book is pure fiction, written several centuries after the real Jonah's time.

Nevertheless, it was written - the story was told - to make a very serious, and very challenging point for good Jews who believed that they were God's chosen people - his special favourites - and that God's job was to bless them and curse their enemies; to protect them against the people of other nations, especially the dreaded Assyrians who had attacked their city, destroyed the Temple and taken them captive. It was certainly not God's place to forgive the enemy's sins and bless them.

Jesus' story about the workers in the vineyard has exactly the same message, in a different context. Jesus was a Jew (it's obvious, but we tend to forget it). His first disciples were Jews. Paul was a Pharisee - a highly educated Jew, steeped in the Scriptures and in Rabbinic teaching. The great revelation to them was that Jesus was the long-awaited, long-promised Messiah, who would set his people free.

Certainly, he didn't fit the mould of what they would have expected in a Messiah. He wasn't of noble birth, or from a priestly family. He wasn't a military leader, a freedom fighter like Judas Maccabeus. And he was constantly crossing boundaries in his dealings with people: speaking to Gentiles and Samaritans; healing them; eating with them. But essentially, in its early years, the Christian Church was a Jewish Sect. That's why there are so

many references to the Old Testament in the gospels, and in Matthew's gospel in particular, because they were written for people who knew the Hebrew Scriptures inside out, to demonstrated to them how Jesus fulfilled the Old Testament prophecies.

And it came as a great shock and surprise to these first Christians when Gentiles started hearing the Gospel and responding to it, asking to be baptised. Not just the 'God-fearers', those Gentiles who were already on the fringes of the Jewish faith; who had their own courtyard in the Temple - but complete foreigners, Romans and Greeks; people with no Jewish background whatsoever.

And some in the early Church were a bit miffed. "It's not fair", they said. "We're God's chosen people. Why should they want in on the act?" There were big fights in the Church over whether Gentile converts should be circumcised, if they were male, and if they should observe the Jewish food laws - in other words, if they had to become Jewish first, in order to be Christian. It really wasn't fair of God to break his own rules like this; to shift the goal-posts; to let new people in on exactly the same terms as those who had been his people for thousands of years.

That, I'm certain, is the background to Jesus' story of the workers in the vineyard, which seems so grossly unfair when we hear it, and which seems to show God, the owner of the vineyard, in a very bad light. Why should the worker who comes along at lunch-time, or just before dark, get the same pay as the one who has been toiling away since dawn? "It's not fair!"

And the answer in this case is that God's grace is not to do with fairness; it's of a different order altogether. It's to do with

boundless generosity; and the bestowing of love, which is not a finite commodity (cf. the children's hymn: 'Love is something, if you give it away, you end up having more. It's just like a magic penny, hold it fast and you won't have any; lend it, spend it and you'll have so many, they roll all over the floor...')

There's a constant temptation, among religious people of all faiths and traditions, to put limits on God's love; to chose the drawbridge once we are safely on board the Ark; to make decisions about who is 'in' and who is 'out', who is acceptable and who isn't (regardless of the Church notice-board, which invariably says "all welcome").

Jonah was shocked and outraged when God extended his grace to the hated foreigners. The early church was rocked to its core when God's Spirit was poured out on Gentiles. In subsequent centuries, there has been similar consternation over God's unconditional welcome for slaves, as well as masters; black and Asian people; women; gay and lesbian people. And always the flow of grace, the direction of movement is outwards, in ever-increasing circles, to include more and more in the RADICAL WELCOME which is at the heart of God's kingdom, if not always lived out in his Church.

For Paul, if we are 'in Christ', one of his favourite phrases, then all other distinctions are meaningless: Jews and Gentiles; male and female; slave and free - all are one in Christ Jesus. And his prayer for the people in Ephesus is one that we can make for ourselves and each other without having to alter a single syllable:

I pray that Christ will make his home in your hearts through faith. I pray that you may have your roots and foundation in love, so that you, together with all God's people, may have the power to



When we dedicate our lives to you, we do so in the knowledge that nothing will separate us from your love.

We thank you for all you have done for each one of us in the past week. Some people may have experienced the joy of knowing you, others may have felt your presence in their place of employment or at home, some may have been comforted by you because they were lonely, sad, ill, stressed or bereaved.

Lord, we bring before you now our prayers for others who live in difficult times. We pray for the countries of the world where innocent people suffer because of corrupt governments. We pray for the people who are hungry and thirsty at home and abroad. We think of the suffering people in war-torn countries where the hope of peace seems distant. We pray for those who grieve for loved ones lost in major disasters. We bring before you those who are in the armed forces and pray for their safety and remember their families at home who worry about them.

In this cold winter weather we pray for those who are homeless and give thanks for the organisations that provide food and shelter.

Lord hear our prayers, the spoken and the unspoken.

In Jesus name.

Amen.

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**HYMN 123:** God is love, let heaven adore him

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**Benediction:** **Go now in the infinite love of God;  
the superabundant grace of Christ;  
the all-enfolding peace of the Spirit  
and may the blessing....**

**Sung Amen**