

JONAH 3,4
GRACE WINS!

Who is the grace of God for? Is it for the old person living on her own who has been part of church all her life, but now can't remember what day of week it is? Is it for the family where parents are working all the hours God sends to make ends meet and have not time for Church? Is it for the drug addict who has never heard of Jesus before and has no idea how to behave in church, but wants to turn his life around and sees Jesus as the One to save him? Is it for the person who doesn't have the capacity to fully understand the Christian faith or someone whose lifestyle is unconventional, or someone who comes from another culture, or who is different in some other way from us? Who is the grace of God for? The answer to that question shapes our way of seeing what God is like, shapes our attitudes to one another, to the church, to our mission, to our relationships, to all kinds of questions.

Who is grace for? Is it for a foreign city, famous for its wickedness, for the capital city of a nation that is our sworn enemy, for a people that otherwise we have grown to hate? Is the grace of God for these people? That is the question at the heart of the story of Jonah's life, faith and ministry. God called him to go to the great, foreign city of Nineveh, the capital of Assyrian Empire, a huge political threat to Israel. What did Jonah believe? He ran away from the call of God on his life; but then discovered that there was no escape from God. Now in chapter 3 he is being called again with the same call: "*Then the...*" (*Jonah 3:1f*) It is the same call as before; this time Jonah went, to preach against the wickedness of the city, to tell them of God's judgement on the city. Something in his gut instinct said "it's not quite as simple as that!" He was proved right!

"*On the...*" (*Jonah 3:4f*) What a fantastic response to his preaching! Revival hits Nineveh. The people believe Jonah and they believe God! They respond with repentance for their wickedness; sackcloth and ashes was the culture's way of showing their penitence before God, bowing low before God to acknowledge their sin and wickedness and praying for forgiveness; even the king found grace from God. Jonah sat, slowly fuming(?), watching to see what would happen. The problem Jonah had was this: he wasn't entirely sure he believed that grace was for these people; he had run away because something inside him felt that there was more to it than simply preaching against their wickedness; he says to God "I knew it! I told you so! *I knew...*" (*Jonah 4:2f*) He wasn't sure that he believed that grace was for Nineveh, but God gave them grace.

The whole conversation about the bush in chapter 4 is about the limits and boundaries of God's grace and compassion. Jonah makes a shelter to protect himself from the heat and God gives a vine to cover the shelter for added protection. Jonah loves the vine that grew up; it shelters him from the heat of the sun and he is happy. But then it dies and he is cross that it has died. God challenges him about why he is cross; but Jonah cared about the vine. This is a conversation about the boundaries and limits of grace: "*You have...*" (*Jonah 4:10f*) because of His love and compassion, God sees it as entirely right and good to have compassion on the people of this great city; His love and compassion are poured out on them in response to Jonah's preaching; they believe and they find forgiveness and grace with God.

Who is grace for? Grace is at the heart of the gospel. Paul tells us that "*it is...*" (*Ephesians 2:8*) Grace is the love of God for people who don't deserve it. In Ephesians 2 Paul has spent the first few verses reminding us of who we are, people with faults and failings, people dead in our sins. But God has changed all of that by

His grace in Jesus. Because Jesus has died and is raised, the love of God is poured into our hearts. The very nature of grace is that God loves us when we don't deserve to be loved by Him. Grace is the very heart of the communion service too: the bread and wine remind us that Jesus died and was raised for us, and that His love is poured out into our hearts, when we don't deserve to be loved.

Who is grace for? I believe that grace is for everyone! But that has a challenge about boundaries and limits. "Jonah represents a comfortable believer. In the face of God's call to proclaim His word to people of a different faith or culture, he was unable to let his understanding of God and of his own faith community be challenged or changed." (Nixon p.178) To see that grace is for everyone challenges these limits and boundaries; to suggest that grace is for everyone "involves taking risks, traversing boundaries, crossing over into dangerous places only to discover that God is already there." (Nixon p.162) To say that grace is for everyone reflects God's love and compassion for a needy world, but it is not an easy answer; it challenges our attitudes to people who are different from us; it challenges what we think about church; do we really believe in a God who has love and compassion for everyone? Or is His love and compassion only for us and people like us?

A famous preacher was conducting a communion service and he noticed a young woman in the congregation who hesitated when the bread came to her; she wasn't sure whether she should take bread or not. He said to her: "Take it, lass; it is meant for sinners!" This is grace at the heart of Christian faith; this is grace at the heart of the gospel; this is grace at the heart of the communion service; this is grace at the heart of church life. Grace is meant for sinners, among whom we are numbered; grace is meant for us; grace is meant for everyone. I'm not sure that Jonah really believed that at the beginning: I'm not sure that he really believed it at the end either, but I hope he did. I love the fact that his story ends with a question mark! Grace is for everyone? Church is for everyone? What do you think?