

**Reflective Evening Worship**  
**6 October 2019**  
**Love mercy....**

Mark 2:1-12  
Jonah 3 & 4

As you may know, every couple of weeks I drive up the M6 to visit my Dad in South Cheshire. It's a pretty tedious route and I often listen to the radio to relieve the boredom.

A couple of weeks ago I tuned in to Woman's Hour. It's a bit of a Marmite programme for me. Some things on there I love. Some I hate, and end up making a snarky comment and turning the radio off with a decided "point".

And on this occasion I was beginning to work up a head of steam when they said they were going to be discussing two plays which were about to open – in rather bijou London theatres. My finger was poised....

But something (or someone!) stopped me – and I am so glad it did, for what followed was a really fascinating conversation showing how a play is lifted off the page and on to the stage – and in particular, how an actor goes about bringing their character to life.

And even more so, for it turned out that both these plays explore the effect on the mother when a teenage son is implicated in a horrible crime – in both plays, rape. And the question the interviewer began with was "What does it take for a mother to stop loving her child?"

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And I guess it was of particular interest to me in the context of tonight's subject of "loving mercy" - What does it take for God to stop loving their child?

And I'm particularly interested in this question because in a sermon a while ago I spoke about breaking down barriers and building bridges and afterwards someone asked me about forgiveness of people who have done unspeakable

things – and it made me realise that we almost never really explore what we mean when we talk about God’s mercy.

God is love

Human beings are not.

The-Human-Propensity-to-Mess-Things-Up (also known as “sin”) is endemic  
Even when we try we constantly get things wrong. We hurt people, say the wrong thing, are faced with impossible dilemmas where the only solution is the “least bad” one, not one which brings flourishing to all parties.

And let’s face it there are those who don’t even try to get things right.

And there are those who actively seek to hurt others in pursuit of their cause, their worldview. Whether it’s ISIS beheading Christians or political decisions which treat some people as if they are somehow subhuman.

How does a loving God respond to all this? All this human failure; human wickedness?

So let’s listen to the story of Jonah.

Yes, him of the whale (large fish)

At the end of chapter 2, he’s been swallowed by the large fish, realised it is God who has saved him, and sung a song of praise to God from the belly of the fish.

As you would

And the fish “spewed Jonah out upon the dry land”

Nice.

Here’s what happened next

*Jonah 3 & 4*

So – I love this story

Jonah doesn’t want the gig

Runs away

God follows, there’s all the fish stuff

Jonah finally does what God wants him to

Proclaims God’s warning to the people of Nineveh

And they heed the warning and repent

And anyone else, you would think, would say

“yippee! I did it! Um – sorry – God did it. But he used me! Wahey!!”

Instead Jonah has a hissy fit and goes into a mega sulk

“You see God- this is why I didn’t want to do it. I knew you would let them off the hook. I knew you would be merciful. Why couldn’t you just have wiped them out as they deserved. I. AM. SO. ANGRY. WITH. YOU.

So off he goes in a mood to see what will happen next.

And instead of God wiping Jonah out, God sends a quick growing vine to provide Jonah with some shelter from the sun. And Jonah likes the vine. He forms a bit of a bond with it.

Until the next day when God appoints a worm (great language) and the vine wilts and dies.

Cue another outburst from Jonah

And God says

“You are concerned about the bush, for which you did not labour and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night. <sup>11</sup> And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?”

He shows Jonah Jonah’s love for the plant – in which he had nothing really invested, other than what he got out of it

And compares it with God’s own love for the people of Nineveh. People whom God imagined, created - individuals who God knows by name. Who God loves every bit as much as he loves Jonah.

And says “it is for this reason that I have shown them compassion and mercy.”  
“Because, Jonah, I know them and I love them. Each one is precious to me.”

So how does this help us with our question?

God is love.

But meaningful love is not just sunshine and happiness  
It is more complex than that

Love seeks peace – shalom, wholeness – for the loved one, and without justice there can be no peace. Just a sticking plaster over a festering wound.

When someone we love is hurt – we seek justice.

And what we call “justice” can manifest in more than one way.

There is retributive justice. Seeking revenge. Punishment. Making the offender suffer. What Jonah wants.

He wants Nineveh wiped out for the hurts they have caused.

And there is restorative justice. Seeking reparation. Seeking healing. Seeking a “putting right” of the injustice.

Making the opportunity for true repentance

- facing up to what has been done and accepting responsibility
- saying and being genuinely sorry
- turning around
- putting right/making reparation

And through this, seeking a change for the better in the offender.

This is what God wants for the people of Nineveh.

How can this happen?

In our own criminal justice system there is a process known as “restorative justice”, in which involves those involved in a specific offence collectively resolve how to deal with the aftermath of the offence and its implications for the future.

It can take the form of mediation btwn the victim and the offender, either directly, or through someone else. And it can also involve the offender making some sort of restitution or reparation where it’s agreed btwn the victim and the offender.

It means the offender has to do [the things in the bullet point list above]

But with God?

Where God is the one offended against

And let’s remember that God’s love is such that an offence against one of his children (ie any human being) is an offence against him too...

How can we possibly meet these requirements for God?

Imagine a high jump bar. To be successful you have to get over the bar without knocking it off.

God, in his mercy, in his generosity, sets the bar for restoration, for forgiveness, quite low. At a level which mere human beings can attain.

Look at Nineveh

We heard in the reading about the “violence” of the city

Elsewhere in the prophets we learn that Nineveh’s wickedness included

- plotting evil against the Lord,
- cruelty and plundering in war,
- prostitution, witchcraft (possibly cult worship) and
- commercial exploitation.

How high do you set the bar for justice in response to these activities?

And yet, God is satisfied with their expressions of repentance and turns the disaster away. He accepts what they are able to offer. He knows that they have offered all that they can.

And the gap between that bar and where the bar should rightfully be, is the measure of God’s mercy.

And in some way which we will never fully understand in this life, the gap is filled by Jesus’ death on the cross.

What does this say about our attitude to those who have committed terrible crimes?

Forgiveness can only be offered by the person who has been hurt, and by God.

That’s why the scribes were so upset in our first reading. Jesus saying that the man’s sins were forgiven was in effect Jesus saying that he was God.

If someone hurts Paul, only Paul and God can forgive that person for that action.

I might need to forgive them for the negative effect that action has had on me, but I cannot forgive them for the action itself.

Maybe we need to look at this story. Of Jonah’s desire for revenge, and of God’s mercy and search for restoration.

Maybe we need to reflect on our own need for mercy.

This is absolutely not to condone the hurt caused – the “sin” – but to see the person behind it. As the old saying goes, “to hate the sin, but to love the sinner”

At the end of the WH discussion the interviewer asked the actor,

“Having played the mother of a son who committed a horrible crime, do you think it is possible to love your child unconditionally?

And the actor’s response was this

“I think so. Having played the mother night after night.... I think you can hate the action. Hate what they have become. But they are still your child.”

And if we can recognise this in our human relationships, how much more it is so with God.

Unconditional love meets justice

The two apparent opposites are reconciled

In the unfathomable depths of God’s mercy.

Amen.