

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

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ADVENT 4

20th December 2015

Hosea 14:1-7

John 1:1-18

There is a pattern in the way that God deals with the people he has made. There is a pattern which repeats itself. Sometimes the scale is small – God came to one man named Abraham and made an agreement with him and his very small family. Sometimes the scale is enormous – as when Adam and Eve, those representative prototypes of humanity, condemned us all to living in rebellion from God. Sometimes we do not realise the true scale of the events we read about, or indeed the events in which we participate.

It is still a pattern that God uses with us, the pattern of his desire to live amongst us, of our driving him away with our rebellion but of his returning in grace to be with us anyway. He uses it with us as individuals, he uses it with us as churches and in human society. It was the pattern that he used, twice, when he sent Jesus.

Jesus birth was, of course at the end of the pattern, the bit where God comes in grace to live with people despite their turning from him. We saw last week how for about five hundred years, people had been looking for that last bit, that promised bit of the cycle, where God would return in grace to be with them. We saw too how some of them began to remember the return but forget the grace and look for judgement instead, judgement which they saw that the people richly deserved. It is always easier to see the judgement that other people deserve, of course, than to expect it for yourself.

Then there were those who, while still focussed on the idea of God's return began to expect him to come in power. They looked for his might to achieve what they wanted for their nation. They forgot the whole idea that they were in rebellion against God, forgot what they owed to God as his servants, and thought of what they felt God owed to them as his special people.

But God knew the pattern too well. He made it, designed it, after all. He was the artist who knew best what he wanted to do and how he could do it. He knew that he would not be coming in judgement or in power. He would be coming in grace.

John wrote this: *Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. (John 3:17) And as we read he also wrote The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. (John 1:17)*

God sent Jesus as his grace, as his undeserved love.

He sent him with the love of a parent for a wayward child. The love which a father has for the baby who cries and cries in the middle of the night, night after night, cries because he is awake and he is scared, cries because he is alone and afraid and it is dark. And the father is tired, and it goes on night after night so that the father is more and more tired, but still each time he goes to his baby and lifts him and cuddles him and soothes him until at last he sleeps again. That is the love that God showed in Jesus.

It is the love of the father of the prodigal son. The father who, although his son has turned from him utterly, taking what he thought was his due, going far away, wasting the gift of his father, yet that father longs for him, looks for him, runs to meet him and embraces him with love, not with judgement. That was the love which God sent into the world when he gave us Jesus.

It is the love of the good shepherd searching for the lost sheep. Jesus told so many stories which were designed to tell us how much God loves us, loves us although we do not deserve it.

In some ways, of course, all love is undeserved. If you think that someone ought to love you, ought to show that they love you by doing this or that, then what you are talking about is not love. Love can only be given freely. Love which is a duty is not love. In fact, it is duty. Sometimes, of course, love can hold us to our duty. The adult child of a difficult parent – for not all parents are perfect or leave perfect impressions on their children – the adult child who, although scarred by parental memories yet continues to visit, continues to care when that parent becomes aged and infirm, is doing her duty, yes, but is held to that duty by love. Without love, she might well just walk away and no one would blame her.

The people who thought that God had a duty to them were right in one respect. God had the duty of a creator towards his creation. He had a duty to which he had bound himself by taking on the covenant with Abraham, a covenant that was to stand for all time. God did have a duty. But when the covenant was broken by the people, and it was broken over and over again, God could have walked away and no blame to him. But he loved us, he still loves us, and so he returned to us in grace.

And what grace! To all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God! (John 1:12). John is still talking mainly about Jesus coming to his own nation, the Jews. But already we can see that circle of grace opening wider, as wide as it will when after the rejection of God's grace which led to the crucifixion, Jesus returned to give the Spirit of God to anyone at all who would receive him. To all who received him he gave the right to become children of God. It is the most wonderful truth. It is the fulfilment of the pattern which God had been working to from the days of Eden onwards. It is the pattern that still illuminates our lives today.

Over the next week you will be thinking about the story of Jesus' coming. The details which the Gospel writers, Matthew and Luke record for us. We will read about the annunciation to Mary and her acceptance of the role of mother of God. We will read about the birth in the stable, because there was no room in the inn. We will read about the angels and the shepherds, about the wise men who came from the east. And we will read about the human reaction to the love of God, seen in Herod's futile, panicky attempt to cling on to his power in the face of God's grace. We like a story with details, and the details of the Christmas story are familiar to us.

But don't forget that the Christmas story is not just about a baby. It is not just for or about children. It is a story, the supreme one of many stories, about God and his love and grace. It is about how God longs to be with us, so much that he will not come in judgement over us but will humble himself even to become one of us. And the details of that truth are not only found in the story of Jesus' birth, nor in the story of his ministry and death and resurrection. The details of that truth are to be found still in the world today.

They are to be found wherever we see God at work. They are to be found in the way that people care for those who cannot care for themselves, be they old and ill, or homeless, or abused, or refugees. We find that truth that God still comes to us in grace when he gives us moments of joy in his worship, or when we are shown unexpected love. We find that God still comes to us in love when his church opens its doors to welcome the stranger, or when its people put themselves out to give to those in need. Grace is love which is not deserved, not expected, and the grace of God is seen through his people as they work in the world, as well as being known in our own hearts when we welcome God the Spirit to make his home there.

Still in the world there are those who gleefully expect God to come in judgement on those who turn from him. Still there are those who long for God to come in power to vindicate them. Yes, God has sometimes spoken in judgement, and he will again. Yes, God has sometimes visited his people in power, though not usually to vindicate them. But these are incidental to the pattern he has established. The pattern of God's dealing with people, always ends with him coming to be with them in grace.

This Christmas time may you know God's grace in your life and appreciate it, and may others know God's grace in their lives through what you, as his child, bring to them. Amen.

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