

Hymns: 51: “Great is thy faithfulness”
 90: Sweet is the work, my God, my King”
 498: “God of all power, and truth, and grace”
 440: “Amazing grace”

Readings: 2 Corinthians 12: 2-10
 Mark 6: 1-6a

AMAZING GRACE

Sometimes the lectionary plays strange games with the preacher – it gives him themes he would never have touched, it leaves him out of his depth, it plays to his strengths, it comes up with the goods. This morning’s readings have, quite by coincidence, struck on themes I was going to have to deal with anyway. All will become clear as this sermon proceeds.

We have 320 visitors from the state of Oregon and they’ve turned up on the weekend of July 4th. We must wish them a happy independence day although, if I’m brutally honest, their Declaration of Independence sends shivers down my spine every time I read its small print. No one can be against those “unalienable rights.” All of us want “Life, Liberty, and [freedom for] the pursuit of Happiness.” The accusations go on, and on. And the final one takes the biscuit. He was, it appears, the ally of “the inhabitants of our frontiers, the merciless Indian savages, whose known role of warfare is an undistinguished destruction of all ages, sexes and conditions.” What a wicked king! But I want our American visitors, all sitting upstairs, that their entire safety today is a result of the magnanimity of that same king who donated the pillars without which the gallery they’re sitting in would collapse. Not quite so wicked after all perhaps?

One of our stained glass windows is dedicated to the memory of a certain Matthew Simpson, a one-time bishop in the Methodist Episcopal Church of America. He had been a medical doctor, a university president, a newspaper editor and a circuit rider by the time he became a bishop in 1852. And it was as a bishop that he made some prodigious journeys across a continent that was still virgin territory. The story of the way he got to Oregon (before the Oregon trail was completed) is heroic.

He travelled by ship from New York to Panama. Then he crossed the isthmus by rail, boat and mule before embarking on a ship heading for San Diego and San Francisco. There he fell seriously ill but somehow continued to travel to Sacramento where he established the first gathering of the Annual Conference of the Californian Methodist Episcopal Church. Without any more ado, and recovered from his fever, he took another boat heading for Portland. Then a steamer up the Willamette River to Oregon City. Back on land, he took a team and carriage for a further twenty miles before completing his journey on horseback. He arrived at the Belknap Settlement after the meetings at which he was to preside had begun. As he burst, mud-bespattered and shattered, into the assembled gathering, the person leading the programme declared: "If the stranger who just came in is Bishop Simpson, he will please pass to the front." The Bishop sat through the agenda items then headed off to get washed and changed. And so he came back and preached his first sermon. He took as his text a verse we heard in our first lesson this morning (such a happy coincidence): "My grace is sufficient for you for power is made perfect in weakness."

All the buffeting, the weariness of constant travel, the obstacles he'd had to face had made him, as such happenings made St Paul, conscious of a grace that strengthens the inner self even when the body is subjected to gross suffering. It is a grace that sustains and re-energises. And it was on the back of the outpouring of such grace that Methodism was begun in the State of Oregon.

Oregon stands numerically at the centre of our thinking today – how could anyone ignore such a lovely crowd of young Americans? – but so too should the Reverend John Beebe. John is presiding at our Communion Service today and it's the first time he's done this for almost a decade. Why? Let me tell you.

John retired from a 34 year long ministry with great honour and on a full pension. He and his dear wife Jan were highly thought of. They were both fully committed to the cause of ecumenism and threw in their lot with fellow Christians in the place of their retirement. This led them into a close fellowship with the Roman Catholic Church. So close that they began to feel frustrated that they were never able to take communion. So John, naively as he now admits, resigned from the Methodist Church simply in order to enjoy fellowship of the deepest kind with their new friends. He did not resign his ministry out of disaffection but for what he considered to be a greater and nobler cause. And it gave him much happiness for a number of years.

The pull of the ministry kept tugging at him, however, and on moving home once again he found himself wanting “to come home” to his beloved Methodist Church. He discovered just how difficult it can be, once the genie has left the bottle, to stuff it back in again. Rules and Regulations, all formulated on the basis that a person who resigns his ministry does so for all kinds of negative reasons, stood in the way of re-entry. We were to find that our gospel passage for this day, again entirely co-incidentally, was to have a very special resonance. A prophet is not without honour except in his own community – that’s what Jesus found on returning to Nazareth. “Isn’t this the carpenter’s son?” they asked. “Don’t we know his parents, his siblings? What on earth is possessing him to speak and act like this?” And so he left them.

Well, it’s not quite like that for John Beebe. But we certainly have found how true it is that the honourable reputation with which he left Methodism was difficult to re-establish once he wanted to return. This preacher was not without honour except in the church which he’d grown up in. But, mercifully, we’ve negotiated the difficulties, steered round the standing orders, mastered the procedures, and brought things to a happy conclusion. And the man who will invite us all to take bread and wine will be a son of the church come home. We will all remember the word of scripture which tells us how much rejoicing there is in heaven when anything/anyone lost is found. So let us all rejoice today as we sit under the ministry of John Beebe.

I began with Matthew Simpson. And I must end with him. There’s one thing I haven’t disclosed. He was an ardent abolitionist. He knew that the church of Christ could not tolerate slavery and he played a part in the debates which led to the separation of the Episcopal Methodist Church of the USA, a split brought about on this very question. Two of the seven “pillars of wisdom” – the French jasper pillars that hold up the balcony at Wesley’s Chapel – were the gift of American Methodists. One came from the Methodist Episcopal Church of the USA and the other from the Methodist Episcopal Church (South). So the split, now thankfully healed, has been built into the architecture of this place.

Just over a week ago, in Charleston South Carolina, the Reverend Senator Clementa Pinckney and eight members of his congregation were killed in church while attending a prayer meeting. The whole world has been shocked by this tragedy and the eulogy of President Obama has touched the hearts of us all. He was clear – America has unfinished business to attend to. Racism and gun crime cannot be ignored much longer.

The happenings in Charleston awoke a memory in my mind, a narrative from the journal of Charles Wesley, who spent several days in that city on his return journey from America to Britain. He saw slavery with his own eyes and gives a lurid account of some of its details. I want to quote one (I could have used several) to show the savagery which surrounded the practice of slavery. Just listen:

Mr Hill, a dancing-master in Charlestown, whipped a woman slave so long that she fell down at his feet for dead. When, by the help of a physician, she was so far recovered as to show signs of life, he repeated the whipping with equal rigour, and concluded with dropping hot sealing-wax upon her flesh. Her crime was over-filling a tea-cup.

God's grace is sufficient for us, says Saint Paul. And it was God's grace which suffused President Obama's eulogy. The grace of those afflicted by the mad gunman's wild shooting spree which led to them forgiving the killer. The grace of all African Americans who have put up with random violence and continual abuse down the generations was also mentioned. Bishop Matthew Simpson knew of this grace and lived in its strength. And so must all of us. As we have been loved, so we must love; as we have been forgiven, so we must forgive; as we have known the generosity of grace, so we must show generosity in all our dealings with those around us, even those who spitefully use us.

The American President ended his eulogy by singing the words of a hymn which we all know. And I am going to imitate him now and perhaps you will join me as we thank God for his truly amazing grace, sufficient for our needs, our strength when, without it, we would be weak.

*Amazing grace, how sweet the sound,
That saved a wretch like me;
I once was lost, but now am found,
Was blind, but now I see.*

Amen.