

THE GOD WHO CHANGES HIS MIND

After the Israelites made the golden calf, built an altar in front of it, and worshipped it as a festival “in the Lord’s honour”, the Lord told Moses that the people had ruined everything. He added, “I have seen these people, and they are impossible to deal with. Now leave Me alone. I am so angry with them that I am going to destroy them. Then I will make you into a great nation.” He stopped referring to them as “My people”, because they had broken His covenant. He simply called them, “these people.” He was disowning them. He called them Moses’ people. He said that they were corrupt. They were like the people before the flood, when God regretted that He had put human beings on the earth. He said that they were like oxen or horses that resist having a yoke on them. “What kind of God is this?” we tend to think, “Of course, God knew beforehand that they would be like this, and would do this. Nothing took Him by surprise. He knew beforehand that no sooner had He given them His Ten Commandments in smoke, fire, and loud noise, they would turn away from what He commanded them.” We say that God knew from the beginning that those people would be impossible to deal with. We even think, “God was playacting when He threatened to make a great nation out of Moses instead.” When we get angry, we react in the heat of the moment. We think, “For God there is no heat of the moment. Surely when He is angry, He doesn’t suddenly make different decisions that go back on His earlier plans.”

Moses interceded for the Israelites. He insisted on calling the Israelites “Your people.” He appealed to God’s special relationship with Israel. He argued: God needed to defend His good name. Otherwise, what would the Egyptians think about Him? He argued, “What about Your promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to give them many descendants, and give them the land of Canaan as a permanent possession?” So the Lord reconsidered His threat.

If people shape God according to their own thoughts, they argue that God must be above all change. If He changes for the better, He was not God before. If He changes for the worse, He is God no longer, and on both counts, would not be God at all. They argue that, when the Bible speaks about God as if He were a human being, they have to strip those expressions away. They reason: “But God has no face, no hand, no eye. God doesn’t change His mind.”

We tend to think that, because God has set down for all time the course of our lives; there is no point praying to Him to change His plans about us, or to intercede for others. We tend to think about Him as if He simply wound things up, and went away, letting things run their own course. If He followed up on what human beings did, that would only make Him sad. And because God, is not a human being, He can’t be sad.

When then happens to God’s wrath and anger? The truth is that God is a God who impinges directly on this world and the lives of His people. This wasn’t just an earlier simpler way people had of thinking about God, which they modified later. Later God told Jeremiah, *“If at any time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be uprooted, torn down and destroyed, and if that nation I warned repents of its evil, then I will relent and not inflict on it the disaster I had planned. And if at another time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be built up and planted, and if it does evil in My sight and does not obey Me, then I will reconsider the good I had intended to do for it.”*

If God were really beyond reacting to a changed situation, could we then speak about forgiveness? Grace is God’s loving decision not to deal with sinners as they deserve, and a decision to pay the cost of His justice Himself, instead. When God forgives us, He really changes His mind about how He will deal with us. God is a God who can be pleaded with. He is willing to be reminded of His promises. He is sad when they sin, and, as the Gospel tells us today, He is glad whenever a lost person is found. That is the connection today between the Old Testament and the Gospel. We think of joy as an emotion that reacts to the situation of the moment. Yet we can say that God rejoices.

During David’s time, the Lord sent a plague on the land, because He was angry that David had given orders for a census. Many people died. When the angel who was afflicting the people stretched out his hand to destroy Jerusalem, the Lord was grieved because of the calamity and told the him, “Enough! Withdraw your hand.” Psalm 106 is a confession of Israel’s long history of rebellion, and a prayer for God to save His people again. At one point the Psalmist says, *“But He took note of their distress when He heard their cry; for their sake He remembered His covenant and out of His great love He relented.”* In Amos chapter 7 the Lord showed His prophet that He was intending to send swarms of locusts to strip the land clean. The prophet cried out “Lord God, forgive! How can Jacob survive? He is so small!” So the Lord relented. Then the Lord showed His prophet that He ‘was preparing to send a great fire to devour the land. When the prophet cried out, “Lord God, I beg you, stop! How can Jacob survive? He is so small”, the Lord again relented.

James encourages us to pray, and assures us that the prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective. The God with whom we have to deal is One who listens to the cry of people to forgive their sins, who relents, and who listens to people's prayers to deliver them from other troubles. In His providence He has taken our prayers into account!

The God with whom we deal is indeed immutable. His wrath does not change. His kindness does not change. These truths warn the wicked, and comfort believers. Yet, beyond this, there is the mystery that God does react in mercy. He relents. He changes His mind when we hold His promises up to Him. He does change His wrath to grace and forgiveness. His wrath and mercy are different from human wrath and mercy. Yet we can know His mercy from the meaning we are able to see in imperfect human mercy. He also rejoices over the lost who are found. We praise God for His joy over us, for He has found us, too, when we were lost.