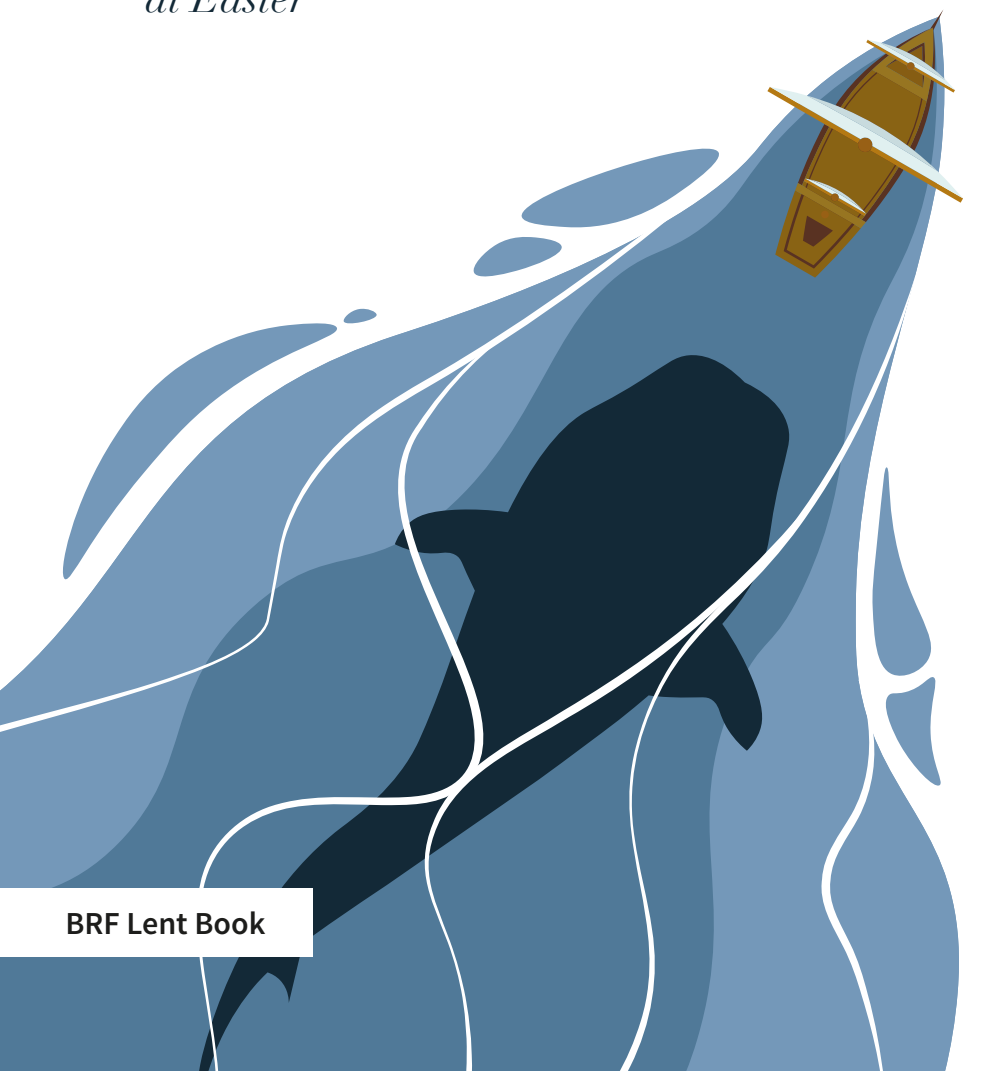
Amy Scott Robinson

images of grace

a journey from darkness to light at Easter



BRF Lent Book

‘Amy transforms the flat landscape of stories we think we know into vividly coloured stumpwork, full of unexpected detail, and woven into a coherent narrative – a Bayeux tapestry of the possibilities of grace. I felt I was suddenly seeing familiar images through 3D glasses.’
Caroline Chartres, contributing editor to *The Church Times*

‘A masterpiece in metaphor. In *Images of Grace*, Amy opens the door for us to understand abstract concepts in concrete ways, ushering us into the presence of God. With engaging anecdotes and a winsome exploration of the biblical stories, she proves a helpful guide to not only sin and atonement but also forgiveness and restoration. A book to return to again and again during Lent – I highly recommend it.’
Amy Boucher Pye, author of *7 Ways to Pray*

‘*Images of Grace* did my soul much good. Amy does not simply teach us daily truths; she immerses us in daily experiences of the gospel. I found it very moving. Highly recommended.’
Glen Scrivener, author and evangelist at Speak Life

‘Amy is a writer of rare talent. Here, she brings her rich theological insight and deep appreciation of metaphor to the topic of forgiveness. Ideally suited for Lent, read it for the fresh sense of wonder at God’s mercy.’
Tanya Marlow, lecturer in pastoral theology, author of *Those Who Wait*

‘*Images of Grace* invites us into a refreshing journey of restoration and transformation. With real-life illustrations and beautiful, lyrical writing, it is like a warm and soothing welcome into God’s story of love over us, with fresh and enticing insights that take us to new places of intimacy and purpose with God. Well-known passages of scripture are explored in new ways that spark the imagination, with images that both assure and instruct.’
Liz Carter, author and poet

‘As an oceanographer, having been in large storms at sea, I was particularly struck by, and found helpful and challenging, the meditations on Jonah.’
Professor Meric Srokosz, author of *Blue Planet, Blue God*

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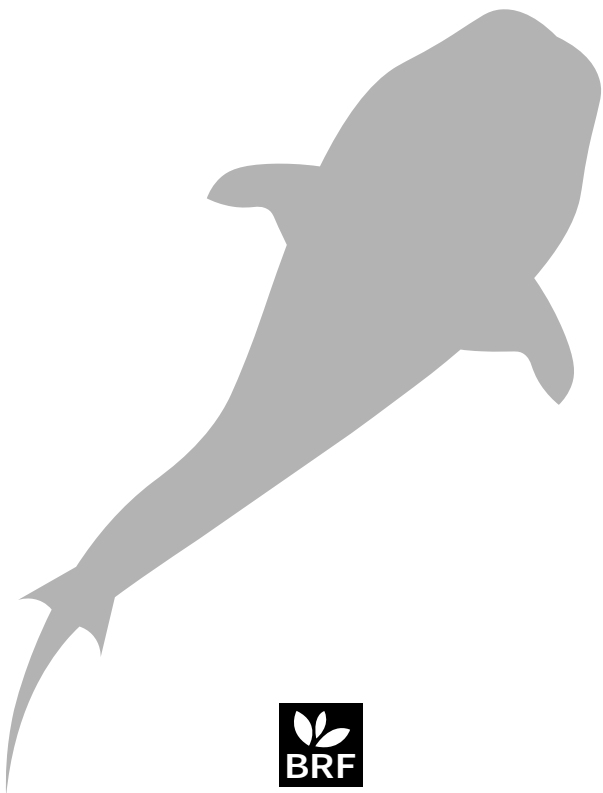

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for Cecily and Ilias
(with thanks for all the help with Greek)

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Introduction

At the heart of the Christian message is a collection of abstract nouns. Love, sin, forgiveness, grace – it is difficult to explain the gospel message without using some or all of these words. The problem with abstract nouns is that, when we use them, we assume that the person we are talking to understands them. Not only that, we assume that they have the same understanding of the word that we do.

I first had the idea for this book because I didn't think that most of the people I talked to had a clear understanding of what sin and grace actually are. I often felt that I was meaning one thing by a word I used, while they were understanding another; and I was beginning to realise that my own definitions of these words were somewhat shaky.

The only way to understand huge abstract concepts, such as sin and forgiveness, is to look at images of them. For example, how would you explain to an alien being what love is? You might point them towards an example of two people in love, tell them a story or read them a poem. You might try to explain, in concrete terms, the behaviour that you would expect from somebody who loves you. All the time, you would be skirting around this big abstract concept of 'love', getting closer to defining and understanding it, testing out its shape and size from different angles. And if you kept going, your alien friend would have a better idea of what love is like. To know what it actually is, you would tell them, you have to experience it yourself; and even then, if you had to define it, you would only be adding your own images, stories and poems.

When it comes to defining God's grace, there are other abstract nouns packed away inside the first one. Grace has to do with forgiveness, and how can we understand forgiveness if we can't define sin, from which

we are forgiven? In this book, we are going to take these abstractions one by one and discover how scripture describes them to us: namely, with images.

The Bible offers us a wide range of images for each of these concepts. It's important to have lots of metaphors and similes to describe abstract things, because no single one of them is exactly accurate. The more we have, the better the understanding that gets built up by all the different pictures. Some of the images are single similes: for example, sin is like turning away from God. Some of them are more extended metaphors: for example, sin is a stain, which means that forgiveness is like being cleaned. Some are whole stories: for example, the parable of the prodigal son, which offers metaphors for sin, repentance, forgiveness, acceptance and grace. We will explore all of those different kinds of images.

Lent is traditionally a time of repentance, fasting and prayer as we prepare to celebrate our salvation at Easter. This Lent, I hope that you will enjoy using this book to approach the concepts of repentance, sin, forgiveness and grace from some new angles, and arrive at Holy Week and Easter with a fresher, richer understanding of God's grace through the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Sunday

David: wholehearted offering

O Lord, open my lips,
and my mouth will declare your praise.
For you have no delight in sacrifice;
if I were to give a burnt-offering, you would not be pleased.
The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit;
a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.
PSALM 51:15–17

Acting as peacemaker in sibling arguments comes with the territory of having more than one child. I'm sure I'm not the only mother who has pulled apart two squealing children, with accusations (and small missiles) still being flung between them, and after a hopeless few minutes trying to get to the bottom of who started it, has barked: 'Just say sorry to each other and STOP!' I'm sure, also, that I'm not the only parent who has received every kind of apology except a real one: the pouting sorry, the shouted sorry, the door-slam sorry, and of course that sibling favourite: 'I'm sorry that *he's* so annoying!'

At one point, searching parenting websites for tips and reassurance, I came across what became known in our family as a 'proper sorry'. It involves four steps: name what you've done wrong; explain why it was wrong and how it hurt the other person; apologise; and say what you can do to make sure it doesn't happen again.

I would love to say that it worked like a charm, but there are no charms in parenting. It did, however, lead me to reflect on how I apologise as an adult, and how often my 'sorry' has been performative, acted out to keep the peace while deep down I remain convinced that I'm in the right.

The thing about a 'proper sorry' is that it can't be said quickly in the heat of the moment, so that the adult will leave you alone and you can get straight back to teasing your sister. It can't be said grumpily or gracelessly; there's simply too much of it to get through. It can't be said while you're still accusing the other person. And it can't even be convincingly acted. It takes time, reflection and distance from the event to manage it.

In other words, it's impossible to say a 'proper sorry' unless you really are sorry, which means that it is not the kind of apology a parent can insist on. It is precious and rare, both between our children and in any human relationship. I've taken to listening for the four steps whenever somebody in the news makes a public apology. They are very rarely all included.

In Psalm 51, David was anxious not just to go through the steps of repentance for show. As the king, he knew what words and actions would have satisfied the people around him, and he knew the sacrifices and rituals that a priest would be likely to ask him to undertake. But he sensed that God would not be pleased with the standard burnt offering. As we saw yesterday, the only way for David to repent was to hand over everything that his sin had broken, including himself, to God.

David begins these verses with 'Lord, open my lips.' It's as if he is aware that even opening his mouth of his own accord will lead him to stumble; he's handing over his speech to God in complete submission.

In verse 17, David recognises that repentance is a sacrifice. This is true even in human relationships. To truly apologise, we have to give something up. For a start, we are giving up our view of ourselves as in the right, which is very hard to part with. We lay aside all hope of justifying or excusing our actions. We also, in a sense, hand ourselves over to the other person: once we have acknowledged that we were wrong, we are letting them decide to accept the apology or to turn away. We face up to the possibility of a consequence for our actions.

In the same way, David says, his broken and contrite heart is a sacrifice to God. It's not transactional, like the burnt offering would be: specific offerings for specific sins. It's not given with an expectation that everything can then go straight back to normal. It's simply a handing over of the whole sorry mess. And David writes that God will not despise it. God knows a proper sorry when he hears one.

A question

How does it feel to receive an authentic, heartfelt apology?

A prayer

O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise. Lead my words, my actions and my thoughts in your ways: I give myself to you completely. Amen

Monday

Jonah: the sea

The sailors said to one another, 'Come, let us cast lots, so that we may know on whose account this calamity has come upon us.' So they cast lots, and the lot fell on Jonah. Then they said to him, 'Tell us why this calamity has come upon us. What is your occupation? Where do you come from? What is your country? And of what people are you?' 'I am a Hebrew,' he replied. 'I worship the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.' Then the men were even more afraid, and said to him, 'What is this that you have done!' For the men knew that he was fleeing from the presence of the Lord, because he had told them so.

Then they said to him, 'What shall we do to you, that the sea may quieten down for us?' For the sea was growing more and more tempestuous. He said to them, 'Pick me up and throw me into the sea; then the sea will quieten down for you; for I know it is because of me that this great storm has come upon you.'

JONAH 1:7–12

We are going to spend the next few days in the book of Jonah. You might like to get your Bible and read through the whole thing. It isn't long, and it's one of those Bible stories that can sometimes hold surprises simply because the versions we know from childhood have crowded out the actual text.

Jonah is a story about sin, repentance and the unchanging, predictable nature of God's mercy. It is full of rich metaphors for those things. I should mention from the start that, just because I am speaking of metaphors, this does not necessarily mean that I'm approaching the whole book as a metaphor or parable. It's presented in the Bible as

history; but whichever way we read it, its images can hold the same meanings.

The story opens with God's direct instruction to Jonah to go and preach to Nineveh, which is a 'great city' full of 'wickedness' (Jonah 1:2). Early listeners to the story would only have needed the name 'Nineveh' to understand that these people were the worst of the worst. They were notorious for their cruelty in war and their merciless treatment of their captives. Speaking out against them would have been terrifying, but as we shall see later, fear was not the reason Jonah gave for his refusal to follow God's instruction.

To avoid the task, Jonah attempted to flee God's presence by getting on a boat bound for Tarshish, which may have been a real place at the time or may be shorthand for 'as far away as he could possibly get'. God responded with a mighty storm which threatened to break up the ship, and the sailors started to throw their cargo overboard, attempting to lighten the boat. Jonah, however, had gone below deck and was fast asleep. The sailors cast lots to find out which of them the storm was meant for, and when the lot fell on Jonah, they woke him up and started quizzing him.

Jonah had never been anything but honest with the sailors. Apparently he had already told them that he was fleeing from the presence of God (v. 10), but it was only when he gave them some specifics about *which* God he was trying to avoid that they became anxious. Describing God as the one 'who made the sea and the dry land' (v. 9) didn't leave much wiggle room for the idea that the ship might eventually escape God's territory.

Jonah, however, was remarkably calm, all things considered. Seeing that his actions had endangered the lives of other people, he knew at once that the only way the ship could be saved would be if he wasn't on it. His short speech to the sailors was grounded in logic.

Jonah had not yet reached a point of full repentance in his attitude, but his actions represent the beginning of that journey. By asking to be thrown into the sea, Jonah was physically and forcibly removing himself from the thing that was taking him away from God's plan and God's path. He was removing himself from the others who were at risk of being harmed by his sin as well. Unlike David before Nathan showed up, Jonah was perfectly self-aware: he knew exactly what he had tried to do and, seeing the consequences of it, he was prepared to undo it immediately, even if that meant sacrificing his life.

I said earlier that one theme in the story of Jonah is God's unchanging, predictable mercy. Jonah was absolutely clear and certain about the cause of the storm and its solution, but he also knew that to be thrown into the sea was to be thrown back on to the mercy of God. His prayer, which we will look at tomorrow, gives some hints of that.

Jonah's clear-eyed attitude to his own sin led him to take emergency evasive action which we can learn from when we feel we are heading in the wrong direction. What waves have we already caused with our actions? Who stands at risk of being harmed or caught up in our choices? What is carrying us away from God's plan, and is it possible, even at great risk, to get clear of it? As we shall see, it's better to be in the sea with God than in a boat without him.

A question

Do you need to jump ship?

A prayer

Dear God, some situations are just as terrifying to get out of as they are to stay in. Give me the courage to make the right choice. Help me to trust that there is safety in your will, O maker of the sea. Amen

Tuesday

Jonah: the belly of the fish

Then Jonah prayed to the Lord his God from the belly of the fish, saying,

'I called to the Lord out of my distress,
and he answered me;
out of the belly of Sheol I cried,
and you heard my voice…
The waters closed in over me;
the deep surrounded me;
weeds were wrapped around my head
at the roots of the mountains.
I went down to the land
whose bars closed upon me forever;
yet you brought up my life from the Pit,
O Lord my God.'

JONAH 2:1–2, 5–6

I have a confession. In all my time performing as a children's story-teller, I have told the story of Jonah countless times, in many different ways, including in rhyme, in song and with accompanying actions and whale vomit sound effects. But I have never got this part of the story quite correct. Jonah's prayer from the belly of the whale has been a blind spot for me, one of those oversights that can come from a story being so familiar from so early in childhood that it becomes part of the wallpaper of your brain. I repent, and I will try to set things right.

The problem is that in children's versions, the simplified story tends to be told something like this: 'Jonah didn't like it in the big fish. It

was dark and smelly. He felt sorry. He prayed and asked for God's help. God answered his prayer and the big fish sicked Jonah up on the beach.' This gives the impression that the fish was a punishment and that Jonah, at his lowest point, prayed a prayer of repentance which resulted in his rescue – absolutely none of which appears in the text.

For a start, Jonah is far from experiencing the fish as the rock bottom of his experience up to this point. Instead, he vividly describes the experience of drowning, sinking to the bottom of the sea and being wrapped in weeds 'at the roots of the mountains' (v. 6). That was his moment of losing all hope, of thinking that he was going to die: 'The land whose bars closed upon me forever' (v. 6). He likens it to Sheol and the Pit, both names for the place of the dead. Then, when he says that God brought up his life from the Pit, he uses the past tense; it is not a hopeful future plea. God has already rescued him. The fish was not a punishment; the fish was the instrument of salvation for Jonah.

Second, there is still no hint of a repentant attitude in Jonah's prayer. There are no requests for forgiveness or acknowledgements of wrongdoing, neither is there any plea for help or rescue. Instead, the prayer is mainly one of praise and thanksgiving. Jonah recalls a previous prayer, made from the bottom of the sea: 'As my life was ebbing away,' he says, 'I remembered the Lord' (v. 7). And he is grateful that his call was heard and answered. Jonah finishes his prayer with a renewed promise of loyalty to God, but he compares himself with 'those who worship vain idols' (v. 8) and makes no mention of those who 'flee to Tarshish,' as he has actually done. The final line of the prayer sums it up: 'Deliverance belongs to the Lord!' (v. 9).

The way back to God from the consequences of sin may not be quick or easy. Sometimes placing ourselves back into God's will can feel like drowning or like sitting in the dark for three days. But with the attitude of Jonah, every step back towards God is taken along a path of thanks, in the knowledge that God is merciful and that we are already in the process of being saved.

Jonah's faith in God's mercy from the very moment of repentance is exactly the reason he gives later in the story for not wanting to preach to Nineveh. Jonah was all too aware of God's enormous capacity for grace, mercy and forgiveness, and he didn't want it to be extended to the worst people on earth. Every bit of the book of Jonah rings with that mercy because, as we discover by the end, it's the whole point of the story.

A question

Is there any sin outside of God's loving mercy?

A prayer

Lord, I want to take the very first step along a road that leads back to you. Thank you that you are already rescuing me. Salvation belongs to the Lord. Amen

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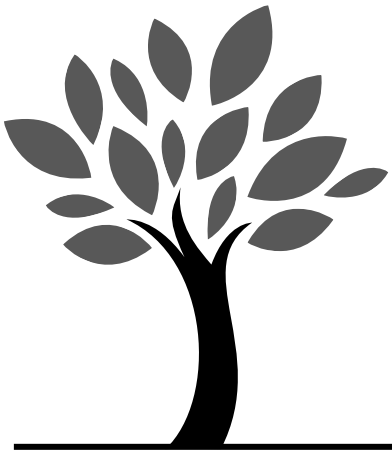

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‘At the heart of the Christian message is a collection of abstract nouns. Love, sin, forgiveness, grace – it is difficult to explain the gospel message without using some or all of these words. The problem with abstract nouns is that, when we use them, we assume that the person we are talking to understands them. Not only that, we assume that they have the same understanding of the word that we do…’

Lent is traditionally a time of repentance, fasting and prayer as we prepare to celebrate our salvation at Easter. Through daily readings and reflections from Ash Wednesday to Easter Day, Amy Scott Robinson explores different biblical images of repentance, sin, forgiveness and grace, bringing them together in Holy Week as a lens through which to view Christ’s work of reconciliation on the cross.

‘When the idea of sin no longer disturbs us, or forgiveness no longer arrests us, or grace no longer delights us, we know we’ve become overfamiliar with the gospel. Enter ***Images of Grace****, where Amy Scott Robinson cracks these key biblical concepts open like pods and replants their seeds in contemporary stories and metaphors to show us anew how good the good news is. When I need a fresh look at the essentials of redemption, this is the book I’ll be reaching for.’*

Sheridan Voysey, presenter of Pause for Thought, BBC Radio 2

Amy Scott Robinson is an author, poet and performance storyteller. She has written BRF’s Advent book *Image of the Invisible*, is a regular contributor to *The Church Times* and provides online resources for Engage Worship.

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