

Choral Evensong – St Paul’s Manuka – 21 February, 2016.

Grace

The grace of God works in us in the most amazing and in the most ordinary of ways. God's grace is a free and undeserved gift. God's grace cannot be earned but it has the most amazing effects in people's lives. God's grace moves the boundaries we place between ourselves and God and brings us all within the boundaries of God's love.

Jesus in his life and teaching did not explain grace - instead he conveyed it and lived it. He often used parables like the Prodigal Son to show what the grace of God is like. For Jesus grace came free of charge, no strings attached and on the house.

Some large corporations make their employees earn their place or their grace in the company. In one large multi-national company all the employees are graded on a scale from 1 (clerks and secretaries) to 27 (the chairman). You must reach grade 9 to qualify for an outside parking space; grade 13 brings the perks of a window, plants and an intercom system; grade 16 offices come equipped with a private bathroom. In this company all employees earned their way. You work your way to the top by means of your own efforts.

The grace of God is nothing like that. Grace means that there is nothing we can do to make God love us more and there is nothing we can do to make God love us less. Our efforts are not important. What is important is God's free gift of grace.

The idea of grace in the Bible is one of God's saving work - the grace of God is the continued reason for the existence of God's chosen people in the Hebrew Scriptures and in the Christian Scriptures it is Jesus' life and work that brings the grace of God for all people. Throughout the Scriptures grace means that God's redemptive love is always and continually reaching out to us to save us and to maintain us in relationship with God. For the Hebrew people, God's grace was shown to the covenant people through God's loving kindness. In the new covenant of Jesus God's grace is shown for all people through Jesus, in his work of love and reconciliation. Hence we speak of 'the grace of God', 'the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ' and 'the grace of God our saviour'. Grace is free and is not the outcome of human effort. It is the grace of God that works in us, turning us to God.

Philip Yancey in his book 'What's so amazing about grace?' tells the story of colleague who worked in slum section of Chicago. Yancey's friend says:

'A prostitute came to me in wretched straits, homeless, sick, unable to buy food for her two year old daughter. Through sobs and tears, she told me she been renting out her daughter - two years old! – renting her to men interested in kinky sex. She made more renting out her daughter for an hour than she could earn on her own in a night. She had to do it, she said, to support her own drug habit. I could hardly bear hearing her sordid story. At last I asked her if she had ever thought of going to church for help. I will never forget the look of pure, naïve shock that crossed her face. "Church", she cried, "Why would I ever go there? I was already feeling terrible about myself. They'd just make me feel worse."

Sometimes people equate grace with morality. These sort of people are what Mark Twain once described as good in the worst sense of the word. The grace of God is not about judgment or morality - it is about loving kindness, graciousness and favour, entirely undeserved but nonetheless freely available.

Some people, like the prostitute reject the Church because they sometimes find so little grace there - people in the church sometimes work so hard to mask it and even withhold it - but we find grace nowhere else than in the love of Jesus which is what the church is on about or should be.

As we the people of God, the Body of Christ, share our worship, as we reach out our hands to be fed at God's table in the Eucharist, as we pray and sing and as we share the Scriptures, God's grace is with us, offered in power and wonder through the person and work of Jesus. God truly feeds us with God's very self and very power - but it cannot remain there. God's grace is with us as we go from this place into our ordinary lives and as we meet and share with other people. God's grace is wonderfully known in the lives and actions of all God's saints. God's grace has nothing to do with morality and judgmental attitudes. God's grace has everything to do with loving kindness, graciousness and favour, so freely and undeservedly given to us through Jesus, with the expectation that we share it with others.

God moved the boundaries for us in Jesus. It was through Jesus death and rising again that we have been included in. Jesus was the one, as John's Gospel tells us, who was full of grace and truth. It is from his

fullness that we receive grace upon grace. God expects us, as the saints of God, to be grace-full people, to be in graced relationships with God and one another, to move the boundaries for others and to include them in as we are included in.

God's grace means that there is nothing we can do to make God love us more and there is nothing we can do to make God love us less. Thanks be to God for the fullness of the grace given and received through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.