

NAURC Trinity Sunday 2020

Sermon: Exploring 'the Grace'

2nd Corinthians 13: 11-13 & 1st Corinthians 12: 1-7

Introductory comment:

- > Today is the day in the church year marked as 'Trinity Sunday' – the occasion when we think about the three ways that Christians experience One God.
- > The idea of the trinity is a piece of church teaching, a 'doctrine', that has been around in Christianity for a very long time, but is never specifically named as such in the Bible.
- > It is, however, fundamental to how we understand our faith in God, which is why we return to this idea each year. As we do so, we look at different Bible texts that are implicitly trinitarian in search of what theologian Carla Works describes as; "The theological bedrock that makes the church's existence possible."
- > This year I am going to reflect on the passage that we call "The Grace" and that quote I have just read comes from a commentary on it.
- > As with any exploration of the doctrine of the trinity, it is impossible to talk about one aspect of God without overlapping into the other two, but I am going to follow the words of the grace in three brief sections.

1. The Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ

- > When I looked up the word 'grace' in the dictionary the first mention was as a way of describing movement – but the way that our translations of what Paul wrote to the church in Corinth use the word 'grace' in a completely different, far more profound, way.
- > The background to the theological use of the term 'grace' is subject to a long and complex debate that dates back to the fifth century and ran on through the Reformation and I am not going there today you may be glad to hear!
- > To cut a long story short, the views of Augustine won out, and this is how prominent Christian author Alistair McGrath summarises it: "Augustine held 'grace' to be the unmerited or underserved gift of God, by which God voluntarily breaks the hold of sin upon humanity. Redemption is possible only as a divine gift." (*Christian Theology an introduction* Blackwell 1998 p 22).
- > Grace is a gift for us. And that gift is embodied in Jesus our Saviour: Emmanuel, God with us in person. Not only is Jesus himself a gift of God's presence, but all that Jesus did and still does for us is part of that same gift of grace.
- > The greatest gift of all that is mediated to us through grace is our very life!
- > It's a theme that I have been following with you since Easter.
- > Jesus came to show us how we can live in covenant with our creator – life as God intends it to be. And human sin and failure and the power of evil in the world that gets in the way of that life was overcome by Jesus when he took our debt of guilt to the cross.

> As we know, the atonement was not the end of the story, because Jesus was raised by God three days later to renew life, to give us all that chance of life restored. Alleluia!

> The grace of Jesus is a free, unmerited gift that is mind-blowing – the gift of our lives in His.

2. The love of God

> Four simple words that are key to our faith and all that we are!

> Seemingly so simple – yet also so hard for many to grasp.

> For the love of God is something we glimpse and can be a part of, but never really grasp the magnitude of.

> Many of us are able to love at least one other person unconditionally – to just, by instinct, to want the very best for another without condition and with no thought of recompense. You just love and that's it. But to do that for all of humanity, all of creation even – and to carry on doing that even when people turn their backs and behave appallingly.

> God's love is mind-blowing!

> The Psalm set of today is number 8, and it gives us an insight of just how much God loves us by reminding us of the unique position of trust and responsibility that God has gift to humanity:

"When I look at the night sky and see the work of your fingers—

the moon and the stars you set in place—

what are mere mortals that you should think about them,

human beings that you should care for them?

Yet you made them only a little lower than God

and crowned them with glory and honour.

You gave them charge of everything you made,

putting all things under their authority." (vv 3-6 New Living Translation)

> We also have another precious gift from God – free will, and, so often we exercise our own will in preference to God's hopes for us. We turn our backs and do our own thing - do what suits us best and kind of behaviour leads to sin. Which, in turn, leads to a break-down in that trust, that love that God freely and willingly pours out for us.

> The overarching story, the metanarrative, of the Bible is a repeating dynamic.

> God loves humanity – right from the start in creating us. But people mess the whole thing up – decide that we know what's best for us and head off in the wrong direction.

- > It may take a while, but God always finds a way of fixing the mess – of restoring the broken relationship and renewing the covenant. It happens time and time again – and supremely so through the gift of God’s only Son, Jesus, our Saviour.
- > That’s how much God loves us – that Jesus gave His life to save ours.
- > Love, Grace, Emmanuel – all intertwined.

3. The communion of the Holy Spirit

> When we say ‘The Grace’ we are in the habit of saying ‘the fellowship of the Holy Spirit’ – which can sound a bit too male – so I have chosen the New Revised Standard version which uses the word “communion” – maybe think of how the Holy Spirit connects us in community – and that is what I’ll be reflecting on in this third section.

- > Last week we celebrated Pentecost the giving of the Holy Spirit to the disciples.
- > The main story of how that happened is in Acts, but we looked at a different recollection of how this happened in John’s Gospel. This story has a clearer emphasis on Jesus giving the Holy Spirit to the disciples when he breathed on them.
- > I am aware that the John text may be uncomfortable in the current circumstances, but we are thinking about faith here rather than public health protection.

- > The important idea to grasp today is how clearly John describes the Holy Spirit as a gift from God, given by Jesus.
- > It’s one of those occasions when all three persons of the trinity are clearly present simultaneously.

- > Pentecost is also regarded as the birthday of the church - I am sure you will have heard it described this way many times before.
- > Its traditional to give presents on such occasions – and as I love chocolate, I have brought along an illustration – a whole box of chocolates!
- > Now this is the good thing about selection boxes – they are best shared – except today I can’t – I don’t think Daniel would fancy having messy chocolate smeared all over the camera lens!
- > They are all chocolates – basically the same, but all different – so everyone can have something they really like. In our household I get to eat all the fruit cream ones – yum!
- > All chocolates, all together, but all different and made to share.
- > Rather like the Holy Spirit - a wonderful gift for all to enjoy that is meant for sharing.

- > That’s the thing about the Holy Spirit – the same gift, but she works differently in every Christian, as Paul explains in his first letter to the church in Corinth that Louise read from earlier.
- > There as many gifts, and combinations of them – far too many to list even – but just one Spirit.

> This is such an important idea for us to understand, as it is fundamental to understanding how, in our wonderful variety, we are all brought together in the community of the Holy Spirit.

> Jesus gave the gracious gift of the Holy Spirit to the disciples to enable them to continue His work of sharing God's love in the world – and that is the task we have the honour to pursue together.

Conclusion

> I have found it helpful in understanding individual unity with a bookmark I made once – I think at Messy Church some years ago.

> The task was to plait together three different coloured strands of wool to make one strand. Think of the three persons of the Trinity – all one but who can be seen individually too – like the one bookmark made of three strands.

> But there is even more to this bookmark.

> Look more closely and you can see that each of the coloured threads is, itself, woven out of strands – and each of those is made up of many different fibres.

> For me, this works as a metaphor for church – many, many individual strands all different, but the same and woven together into one and designed to help explore the contents of the Bible the main source of our faith.

> There is so much more that can be found in that simple little credal statement that Paul wrote that we call 'The Grace' – perhaps we can carry on thinking it through. But let's draw our reflections to a close for now with a time of music and reflection from Resound Worship – in a song based on 'The Grace'.