

Sunday 10th March 2024 - Looking at the Cross: Mercy - Littlebourne PH

This our 4th Lent talk and we're looking at mercy. Jesus took our punishment for sin on himself on the cross so that we can receive forgiveness and our relationship with God can be restored. We live in an entitlement society, but the cross reminds us that we are saved by grace, not right. The grace we have received is free but costly and challenges us to live in ways that do not cheapen this precious gift.

We have two readings: Ephesians 2.1-10; John 1.6-18

Ephesians 2.1-10 As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, ² in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. ³ All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath. ⁴ But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, ⁵ made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. ⁶ And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, ⁷ in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. ⁸ For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— ⁹ not by works, so that no one can boast. ¹⁰ For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

John 1.6-18 ⁶ There was a man sent from God whose name was John. ⁷ He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all might believe. ⁸ He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light. ⁹ The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world. ¹⁰ He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. ¹¹ He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. ¹² Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God— ¹³ children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God. ¹⁴ The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. ¹⁵ (John testified concerning him. He cried out, saying, "This is the one I spoke about when I said, 'He who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.'") ¹⁶ Out of his fullness we have all received grace in place of grace already given. ¹⁷ For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. ¹⁸ No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known.

Martin Luther's great discovery after years of searching for truth by comparing what the Bible said to substantiate the traditions and teaching of the Church, was that man is saved by grace. Grace is the free gift of mercy. Mercy is a word we know the meaning of – not punishing someone in the way that is deserved for the crime committed, but instead being lenient or even not punishing at all. Grace is one of those words Christians bandy about without really knowing what it means. We talk about the grace of God and are thankful for receiving it, but what is it exactly? Sometimes people use the acronym: God's Riches At Christ's Expense, which begs the question – what are God's riches? The Greek word for grace is *charis*. *Charis* is in Greek mythology a goddess of charm, beauty, nature, human creativity and fertility. The word became synonymous with loving-kindness, favour, good-will, charm, liveliness, and we get charisma derived from this word, which means the capacity to charm and captivate others by the force of one's personality. Jerome translated *charis* with *gratia* (from which we derive the word grace), which in Latin means variously: charm, agreeableness, regard, kindness, gratitude and thanks. As an aside "thank you" in Latin is "gratias tibi ago" – I put forth to you thanks - because they didn't just say "gratiae" or thanks. The Spanish say "gracias" and the French say "merci" for thanks, so can grace and mercy be seen as interchangeable? "Grace" can mean many things in its original sense and it is thrown around in Christian circles as if everyone knows exactly what it means. When we say grace as a prayer before eating, we use the word in its original meaning of gratitude and thankfulness. When we say, "there but for the grace of God, go I" the word grace means loving-kindness or mercy in its protective sense. And of course, we say the grace to each other at the end of the service wishing each other the grace or undeserved favour of the son, Jesus, the love of the Father, God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. So, thinking about that sense is probably where we can see its true meaning: the loving-kindness of God to mercifully protect us from his righteous justice which would convict us all to be guilty of disobedience of his commandments. Grace is the free undeserved favour we receive from our loving Father God.

Back to Luther, who summarised that the reasons a Christian is saved can be boiled down to five things: *sola gratia, sola fide, solus Christus, sola scriptura* and *soli deo gloria* – by grace alone, by faith alone, Christ alone, Scripture alone and to God the glory only. In this passage in Ephesians Paul, through the Holy Spirit, tells us that because of God's loving kindness and mercy, we can be saved. That salvation cannot be earned by anything that we do to please God through good works because it is a free gift from God. Jesus took upon himself the punishment we deserve for our sinfulness. *For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— ⁹ not by works, so that no*

one can boast. ¹⁰ For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do. Even faith is a gift of God. What does "faith" mean? Trust, belief, assurance. God gives us the power to believe, and then we act upon that belief. God reveals, whether through the Word or through the Spirit, the desire to believe, but we must act upon that desire, by confessing with our lips that Jesus is Lord, repenting of our sin, and asking for forgiveness. For us to receive the free gift of undeserved favour and mercy we need to act and accept Jesus as Lord and Saviour. Jesus is at the door knocking but we have to open the door to let him in.. Faith comes by hearing or reading the Word of God. Often we aren't ready to receive that free gift because we think we are unworthy or that we don't deserve something for nothing. From earliest childhood the concept of fairness exists in us, and the precious gift of eternal life being offered without any price being paid up front seems too good to be true as a fair exchange. But Jesus paid the price and offers us this free gift. Undeserved loving kindness from our Creator who made us in his image so that we might have a relationship with him. He loves us and wants our love and attention... something we provide for those we love on earth for which we expect no payment or reciprocal exchange of gifts and who we would forgive and keep loving regardless of what they do to us. Love that we looked at two weeks ago doesn't keep a record of wrongs and is always kind and forgiving.

The Ephesians passage shows us the cost of grace, the cost paid by Jesus who is God for us to receive undeserved favour and mercy.

The passage from John shows us who Jesus is and why he came on earth to provide us with undeserved favour. Jesus is the light of the world and gave us all the right to be children of God... that is sons and daughters of God. Jesus is the son of God but he nearly always referred himself as the "son of man". The Jews knew they were all sons of God so anyone calling himself the son of God meant he was just one of them. Using the term son of man is a reference to Daniel 7:13-14 ¹³ 'In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. ¹⁴ He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all nations and peoples of every language worshipped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed' The scribes and Pharisees knew this passage that Jesus could be referring, and they also knew the ambiguity of the phrase. Daniel tells us that authority glory power belonged to the son of man who was worshipped. In Matthew 4:10 Jesus told Satan "it is written you shall worship the Lord your God and serve him only" (Exodus 20:3, Deut 5:7 and Deut 6:13) Yet others – the Gospel writers and the apostles referred to Jesus as the Son of God, as did Satan in Matthew 4:6 – a fact that Jesus did not deny. John in verses 16-18 states unequivocally that Jesus is God and from him we have received the undeserved favour and mercy. The truth has been made known to us because of Jesus. ¹⁶ Out of his fullness we have all received grace in place of grace already given. ¹⁷ For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. ¹⁸ No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known.

Verse 10 says Jesus is the creator of the world and only God is the creator: ¹⁰ He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. Right at the beginning of John's Gospel he states as facts things that would be disputed by the Jews then and are still not accepted by them today along with millions of others who reject Jesus. Assertions about the supernatural cannot be proven with science which cannot measure what is outside nature. Acceptance of the mercy of God presumes the existence of God and the need for mercy because we are all sinners. Without belief in the creator of the universe, without faith in the truth revealed in the Bible, mercy and forgiveness from Jesus, who is God, seems foolishness. Paul explains this in his first letter to the Corinthians chapter 1:18 ¹⁸ For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. ¹⁹ For it is written: 'I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate.' (Isaiah 29:14) ²⁰ Where is the wise person? Where is the teacher of the law? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? ²¹ For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. ²² Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, ²³ but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, ²⁴ but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. ²⁵ For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.

We are back to the fact that God calls us to listen to what is revealed about him, he draws those with ears to hear and eyes to see the reality of his existence and his character and why he made us his children. Children are loved: mercy and forgiveness are provided to them by parents, grandparents, relatives, friends, teachers and even strangers when they do things that are wrong, foolish, mischievous or really bad. That is how it is meant to be: we are merciful and forgiving towards them because they are young. That is how God feels about us who are unaware of our sinfulness as well as those who are all too aware of their sinfulness. He loves us. He is holy and cannot have anything unholy in his presence, but he has made a way for us to come into his presence through the blood shed by Jesus on the cross, having taken the punishment for sin that we all deserve, and generously allowing us to receive mercy and be forgiven.