

The Grace

At the age of 17, during a gap year, I started working at Pilgrim Hall Conference Centre in the wonderfully named Uckfield, north of Brighton in East Sussex, England.

I had grown up in the Brethren Church here in Tasmania but I was discovering that other Christians didn't things do things the same way as in the Church in which I grew up.

I remember sitting in a staff Bible study and as we came to the end the leader said quietly "The Grace", which I thought was a bit odd as it well after dinner.

Then everyone but me started to intone in meaningful voices "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all" Some had their eyes shut with a reverent look on their face, some were looking meaningfully around. I just had a look of shock having no idea what had just happened and how they all knew what to say.

But these words that I suspect that many of us know so well should remain stunning to us. Familiarity has if not bred contempt, has stopped us from really listening to, learning from and living out these words. I pray that as we look at the words of The Grace we will find that they comfort, challenge and even confront us.

WORDS OF COMFORT: WELCOME

The Grace is profoundly Trinitarian which is very appropriate on this Trinity Sunday. The Trinity is of course a difficult idea to get our head around but here we should notice that Paul raises the issue in an almost ad hoc way. He is not speaking from a position of theological speculation but rather as he reflects on his experience and that of his fellow believers. The concept of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit arises from what has happened to believers in Jesus.

As John Polkinghorne, English theoretical physicist, theologian, and Anglican priest says "The proclamation of the One in Three and Three in One is not a piece of mystical arithmetic, but a summary of data." (Science and Christian Belief, p154)

Father, Son and Holy Spirit may be the Christian understanding of God but just as importantly the real subject of this verse which is the idea of grace, love and communion or fellowship. These are the words that Paul wants his readers to have in their minds as they think about God.

Grace, love, fellowship, these are words of welcome, friendship and acceptance. Astounding words and so different from how many people think of God.

If we were to put together a modern understanding or belief in God it could be "May the ethics of Jesus, the indifference of God and emotion of the Holy Spirit be with those who self-identify as religious."

But the words are of grace, love and fellowship to all.

And this is not dependant on us, this welcome is purely down to the grace and love of God for us, and the fellowship he has established with us. Earlier in 2 Corinthians Paul had written: "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich." (8:9)

Just as the emerging understanding of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit arose from the joy of Easter, the victory of the ascension and the power of Pentecost, so did the believers' understanding of grace, love and fellowship.

Grace is not simply a characteristic of Jesus, it has a concrete expression, a historic anchor in the self giving of Jesus life, death and resurrection. Here in this grace at the cross we see that the love of God is not a spiritual idea but profoundly personal

and self sacrificial, and we also see the lengths God was willing to go to bring us into fellowship with him. Here we see grace which wins our salvation, shows us God's love for us and by the Holy Spirit welcomes us into the family. It is this grace that is sufficient for us.

One commentator has put it "a grace completely undeserved, yet overwhelmingly generous and astonishingly committed to the well being of sinful human beings." (Kruse)

I hope that you know the great comfort of knowing this grace, love and welcome, this amazing grace, deep love and eternal communion.

Have you made these words of The Grace your own?

Is this grace, love and welcome with you?

Come find true comfort in the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

WORDS THAT CHALLENGE: PUT JESUS FIRST

But there is not only comfort there is also challenge.

Many years later from that day in England I was the assistant minister at St. Martin's, Killara in Sydney. At the evening service ended the senior minister would leave the prayer desk which was on the south side of the church move to the middle, he would read The Grace as a benediction, walk back to the prayer desk, put the book down before going to the Vestry which was on the north side of the building.. As a brash assistant I decided that this was all a bit fussy, I could make it simpler by simply moving to the middle saying The Grace and then moving to the Vestry. How hard could it be to remember such a well known bit of liturgy?

So the service came to an end, I left the prayer book on the prayer desk, moved to the middle of the Church and said: "The Grace of God and the love of God and ... um" I was stumped and I had to go back to the prayer desk for the prayer book to get it right.

What had thrown me was that The Grace doesn't start where you would expect it. We are used to talking of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, but Paul doesn't follow that order, it starts not with God as such but with the Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

This should surprise us perhaps more than it does. Paul was a good monotheistic Jew who knew deep in his being that there was no one above God, and it was God alone who he was to worship with all his heart, mind, soul and strength. So how could he put Jesus before God? He had discovered or better it had been revealed to him as he put it earlier in this letter: "For it is the God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ". 2 Cor 4:6

This change in order then is not simply a stylistic variation, Paul is making a profound theological point. The God of creation, the God of the Exodus, the God praised in the Psalms has now been revealed in a carpenter from Nazareth and his ignominious death and there we see the grace of God revealed. Paul kept coming back to Jesus and his cross and his resurrection for there he knows the grace, love and fellowship of God.

All true Christian thinking and theology flows from the reality of Jesus. So the challenge for us is do we put Jesus in the same exalted place, or do we think in vague terms about God. If we do not focus on Jesus, we will not truly know the grace and love and welcome that we are offered.

My Grandfather, JM Davies was quite well known in Brethren circles around the world, and to him I owe to some extent my faith as well as my eyebrow. During the week I found a short commentary he wrote on Paul's Letters to the Corinthians On these verse he wrote "The order in which the persons are named may be suggestive of the fact that is only through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ that we experimentally come to know the love of God, and", he continues, "it is only in the power of the Holy Spirit that this may be realized." Well said Grandpa.

We know truly of grace when we look to Jesus, and then we truly know the love of God, and know the Spirit at work in our lives. Without Jesus we do not truly know this grace, love and fellowship.

The challenge of The Grace is to keep putting Jesus first.

WORDS THAT CONFRONT US

But these words don't just comfort and challenge, they confront us.

These well known peaceful words end one of Paul's most contentious letters where Paul has been in serious conflict with a congregation he truly loves but with whom he has serious issues, and, it seems, they with him.

The words of The Grace then are not just a blessing but they are to confront the Corinthians with the reality of where they are. If they have grace, love and fellowship from Jesus, God and the Holy Spirit are they showing such grace, love and fellowship in their community? The answer is clearly no. And sadly it remains true.

For many the issue is not of grace but the disgrace of the hypocrisy of Christians, the judgmentalism of "the Godly" and the guilt of the unholy.

We may weep at such a situation but we need to look to ourselves. Do we as a Church and individuals show grace, love and fellowship. For our world right now needs to see such things so they too can embrace it, and it is a grace love and fellowship to all, to all.

We need to feel the challenge here, Jesus gives us grace do we show it to others? God self sacrificially loved us, do we show the same? The Spirit calls us undeservedly into fellowship with God do we create divisions?

A mistake that is often made when thinking about ideas about grace and love is that they are warm and cuddly sort of words that make us feel good about ourselves. But we mistake the grace of Jesus and the love of God like that.

I wonder how many of you are dog people? We have a cavoodle puppy around the house at the moment and its great fun. The wonderful thing about dogs is they love us no matter what, always happy to see us, excited when we do things with them. They are completely uncritical in their love, they just affirm us.

That is the love of a dog but not the love of God. God does love us, but does he does not uncritically affirm all that we are and what we do. Rather he wants us to grow in grace, love and fellowship.

After all Jesus came to save us not to tell us that he is OK and we are OK, but to repent, to change our lives. The grace of Jesus reaches to us wherever we are but it shouldn't leave us there, but should lead us into a new way of living. In Jesus we see that to live out grace, love and fellowship is costly, but it is also to come out of darkness in the glorious light of God.

We see a little snap shot of this in the four injunctions that Paul gives his readers. To this chaotic church Paul says they are to put things in order, that is put things that are wrong right, listen to Paul's appeal which is to encourage and strengthen each other, to agree with each other, or be of one mind, and live in peace which needs no explanation but some effort to live out.

In other words as the meaning of grace, love and fellowship are historically grounded in Jesus so that are to be lived out in history in our story, in our churches.

If we claim to put Jesus first how can we not be individuals and communities that do know radiate with the light of grace, love and fellowship. So how are we doing, are grace love and fellowship with us, do they flow from us?

If that was Paul's pray for the Corinthian church it should be ours whatever problems our church may have.

The way to change this is not to try really hard to summon up these things but to come back to the source and pray that they will be with us. For if we show the grace of

our Lord Jesus Christ, the Love of God and the Fellowship of the Holy Spirit what a blessing we will be to each other and to our city, and frankly currently to our world.

So let us say again the words of comfort, the challenge and confrontation and as a prayer.

The Grace The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all evermore. Amen.