

Dispensing grace

Readings: Luke 9:46-48, Matthew 7:7 -12

Some years ago I was praying for a work colleague who was in difficult circumstances on lots of levels including a messy marriage break-up. I remember praying that the Lord would bring peace and order because “God is not a God of chaos but of peace.” I had heard others pray this and it made sense. A few days later my friend came back and said how she appreciated my prayer but felt that specific phrase was not true for her. In fact, God was present in the midst of the chaos that was her life right now.

Now if you look up 1 Cor 14:33 the context is of a Christian service of worship. Paul was saying we need to be orderly in worship services. I had Scripture completely out of context. I was wrong to pray what I did. I misquoted Scripture and could have caused my friend spiritual harm.

Everyone today needs to hear of and to receive God’s grace. We Christians have been guilty for far too long of dishing out judgement as if it were our job to do so! In his book “Vanishing Grace” Philip Yancey quotes a survey in the US. The results are damning.

In 1996, 85% of Americans who had no religious commitment still viewed Christianity favourably. By 2009, only 16% of young ‘outsiders’ had a favourable impression of Christianity and just 3% had a good impression of evangelicals.¹

Now it is very easy to say that this is society’s fault. They are so immoral, so Godless, of course they can’t see us correctly! Actually that is a major crock!

Perhaps we can blame the media because they highlight some wierdo Christians who are homophobes, racist, and play with snakes. Again that is a crock and lets us off the hook too lightly. The truth is that many Christians in the West are afraid – we are afraid that our life-styles are being threatened. Morality seems to have gone out the window and the nuclear family is at risk - that is true. We have some grounds for fear. But fear must not govern our lives; fear should not dictate how we connect with those outside the Christian church. And fear certainly must not govern how we read or share the Bible with others.

This month is Bible month and it is to God’s word that we can turn not only for our own reassurance but also as our rule for life and relationships.

And yet, we need to learn to handle God’s word humbly. Some people are certain of everything – who is in and out, and exactly what every passage means.

A couple of weeks ago John P urged us to search the Scriptures for ourselves. John is right. Don’t take the preachers word as gospel. Teachers interpret God’s word wrongly sometimes. Sometimes you will get it wrong too. We all need a great deal

¹ Yancey, Vanishing Grace, p3

of humility in reading and interpreting God's word. We need the Holy Spirit to be with us as we read and digest. We also need each other.

The Bible has always been interpreted communally. In the West we are too much focused on individuals – it is not all about me! God's word is for the individual Yes. But God's word is also for the Christian community and it is for the whole world.

There are some very tricky passages to interpret aren't there? How do we know what to take literally and what are word pictures? How do we understand the real meaning of some words and passages? Again I suggest, with great humility.

Someone once told me they were amazed at the amount of grey I could live with. By that they meant that I freely admitted there was much I don't understand. (That is not humility on my part btw. It's just acknowledging the painfully obvious. 😊)

John also pointed out the dangers there are in being a teacher. Perhaps part of this danger lies in thinking we do know everything when in fact it is the little ones who often know, and certainly live out, far more than we do.

The Bible is a collection of books. Each book is a different genre – poetry, history, apocalyptic, parable, teaching etc. Unlike the Koran, which it is claimed is dictated word for word by God, the Bible is written by different people. The Lord used their different personalities and writing styles rather than bypassing them; human freedom is valued greatly and I dare to say, greatly enjoyed, by God though - of course it brings trouble too.

Each individual book has its own flavour but there is a common thread. That thread is God's unrelenting grace and mercy. When God's word is shared authentically we ought to feel like the disciples who said "Didn't we feel on fire as he conversed with us on the road, as he opened up the Scriptures for us?" Luke 24:32 God's word will sometimes bring conviction but it will always bring freedom too; and it will always point us to Jesus. It is Jesus who embodies God's grace and mercy. It is Jesus who not only shows the way but who makes a way for us; who himself is the way! John 14:6 No wonder the disciples heart burned when the One who is the Way explained Scripture to them.

It seems to me that today's Scripture readings really do embody the best attitude to have towards reading and sharing the Bible.

Recently I was talking with someone inspirational! What moved me was the simplicity of their faith. For them Jesus' love is everything. They believe that if we could love one another the way Jesus does, we'd have no problems. This might sound a bit simplistic but is it? I suspect I was in the presence of one who might have seemed to be one of the least, but is in fact, one of the greatest.

Perhaps we'd be best to balance this person's humility and simplicity with the faith expressed in Matthew 7. While the passage is really talking about prayer, it does apply to the Bible also I believe. Before we read the Bible it is really good to ask the Lord to speak to us and to have the faith that he will indeed speak. And usually he

will speak in words we can understand. Sometimes we gain understanding in community rather than as an individual. The Lord really does want to speak to us, he wants us to learn and grow and the primary way this happens is through his Word.

Over the next few weeks we have an opportunity to grow ourselves. This week is the time to invite others to share that opportunity with us. On Sunday we are sharing in an Alpha dinner with St Barnabas at Stoke. All we have to do is invite someone to the dinner and to go with them. At the dinner we will be given all the information we need to decide whether or not to attend the course.

We have been advertising this all month so I know you will have been praying about who to invite. I know you will also have seen the lamps on the board at the back of church. Please take a lampshade from the board, write the person's name on it and then invite that person this week. Whether they say yes or no is not your responsibility.

A few weeks ago I preached about Leaving our Comfort Zone. This is an opportunity for you to do that with a simple invitation. If the person you invite says 'yes' then please do go with them to the dinner. You don't have to attend the whole course unless the Lord is telling you to do so. If they say 'no' that is absolutely fine. Don't pressure them. Just pray that the Lord will continue to work in their life. And ask them again whenever the next opportunity presents itself.

Heavenly Father, we bow in your presence
May your Word be our rule Your Spirit our teacher,
And your greater glory our supreme concern,
Through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.