

The Grace

2 Corinthians 13:11-14

There's an old story regarding St. Augustine who, according to the story, was struggling to understand the concept of the Trinity, the belief that God is one, but also Father Son, and Holy Spirit. So he went for a wander on the beach.

As he walked along he came upon a little boy digging a hole in the sand with a seashell and then running to the ocean, filling the shell, and rushing back to pour it into the hole he had made.

"What are you doing, little man," Augustine asked.

"I'm trying to put the ocean into this hole", the boy replied.

A huge peace overwhelmed over Augustine at the words of this young boy because he realised that this was what he had been trying to do... fit the great mysteries of God into his mind.

I'm not going to give my two bob's worth of explanation into this incredible mystery of our faith.

What I would like to do is focus on three dimensions or characteristics of the Trinity contained in contained in Paul's famous benediction found at the very end of Paul's second letter to the Corinthians.

I guess many of you would have been at one of those good old Anglican meetings when the leader or the chairperson finishes the meeting by inviting us to say the grace together.

And some with their eyes closed – and others with eyes opened - begin to recite the old familiar words; *'may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all evermore. Amen'*

These words are found as Paul is signing off what was actually his third letter. Let me read the whole of this passage again.

'Finally, brothers and sisters, good-bye. Aim for perfection, listen to my appeal, be of one mind, live in peace. And the God of love and peace will be with you. Greet one another with a holy kiss.

All the saints send their greetings. May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.'

Finally brothers and sisters, goodbye.'

The word translated here as 'goodbye' is not the normal word for a final farewell.

It could also be translated as 'rejoice' – a bit like what he wrote in Phillipians. As Paul signs off he is essentially encouraging them to be full of joy in the Lord – something that we immediately sense when we walk through the door of all our churches!.

Aim for perfection.

Keep striving for perfection – knowing we'll never reach it in this life.

Continue to look for ways of growing spiritually both individually and as church. Don't settle for second best when faith is concerned.

Listen to my appeal

Bit of urgency creeping in here now from Paul

Be of one mind.

I've just come back from two weeks at General Synod. Really tough being in an environment with 120 people bitterly divided on the whole issue of human sexuality, with polarised extremes unable

to hear or respect what the other is saying. It is such as joy to return to a Diocese where, although there is a continuum of views on this issue, we are of one mind in our desire to be faithful to scripture and yet loving and welcoming to all people.

Live in peace

Peace is not the absence of conflict but the presence of deep respect for one another. Bitterness and unforgiveness can't exist where there is respect and understanding.

And the God of love and peace will be with you..

If we live in unity and respect we will experience the incredible love and peace of God.

But if our church is plagued by disunity and disrespect then God will be absent in our fellowship and in our lives.

Greet one another with a holy kiss.....

(Tell Nativity story.)

That's all introduction to this final benediction that closes the letter:

'May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.'

As I said at the very beginning, rather than try to define and understand the Trinity let's look at the three dynamic characteristics of the Trinity reflected in these words.

1. The Grace of our Lord, Jesus Christ.

Why did Paul start with grace rather than love?

Surely it all starts with God's love.

After all it was because God so loved the world that he gave his only son!

But Paul starts with grace, because it was grace that started him on the journey of discovering the incredible love of God – that grace that blew him away on the road to Damascus when he was on his crusade to find and destroy any followers of Jesus who might be infiltrating the synagogues in Damascus.

I don't need to recount this story – you'll all be very familiar with it.

But Paul's transformation was dramatic and he himself said it was an act of undeserved, unexpected grace.

The world talks as if it understands the concept of grace. Lending institutions may give us a period of *grace*. A dubious political figure falls from *grace*. Musicians talk about a *grace* note. We describe an actress as *gracious* and a dancer as *graceful*. We use the word to name hospitals, baby girls, kings, and the prayer we say before a meal.

We talk as though we know what grace means.

And it's not that much different within the Church. Grace is in many of the songs we sing, in the Bible verses we read. Preachers try and explain it and hymns proclaim it.

But do we really understand it?

An author named Max Lucado suggests that we have settled for 'wimpy grace!' 'It politely occupies a phrase in a hymn, fits nicely on a church sign. It never causes trouble or demands a response. When asked, "Do you believe in grace?" who could say no?

....The question we need to ask is: Have we been changed by grace? Shaped by grace? Strengthened by grace? Made bolder by grace? Softened by grace?

Grace rewires us.

.....It is the voice that calls us to change and then gives us the power to pull it off!

Grace is actually a spiritual heart transplant!

In the spring of 2010 a bright vivacious, thirteen year old girl named Taylor was tragically killed in a skiing accident. Every parent's worst nightmare suddenly came true for Taylor's parents - Tara and Todd Storch; the funeral, the burial, the questions, the tears.

They decided to donate their daughter's organs to needy patients.

Taylor's heart went to a another young woman named Patricia Winters, whose heart had begun to fail some years earlier leaving her too weak to do much more than sleep. Taylor's heart gave Patricia a fresh start in life.

Taylor's Mum, Tara had only one request: she wanted to hear the heart of her daughter. She and Todd flew from Dallas to Phoenix and went to Patricia's home to listen to Taylor's heart.

Two mothers embraced for a long time and then Patricia handed Tara and Todd a stethoscope. When they listened to the healthy rhythm whose heart did they hear? Wasn't it the still beating heart of their daughter?

It lives in a different body but the heart is the heart of their child.

When God listens to our heart, does he hear the beating heart of his Son?

Paul wrote in Galatians 'It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me'

This is the grace that we sing of.

The grace that transformed a woman apparently caught in the act of committing adultery.

It's the transforming grace that throws its arms around the prodigal son as he returns home.

It's the redeeming grace that forgave Peter after denying Jesus three times.

It's the underserved grace that captured a legalistic Pharisee hell-bent on destroying the Church.

It's the amazing grace that hung on the cross for the sin of the world.

It is the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

2. The love of God.

The transforming grace that Paul experienced on the Damascus road led him on a new journey of discovery into the love of God.

As a highly educated Pharisee he knew all about the God of the Hebrew Bible – the God of the laws and commandments.

He might have known all *about* God and been passionate in his zeal but he didn't *know* God and therefore he knew nothing of the love of God.

As the blinkers fell from his eyes Paul began to read his old scriptures through the multi-coloured lens of God's love.

Creation was an act of love.

The woman given to the man at the beginning of creation was an act of love.

Even after the man and woman were banished into the wilderness there's a delightful little passage (at the end of Genesis 3 where God makes some clothes for Adam and Eve.

Why the heck would he do that when he's just kicked them out of paradise?
Because he loves them.

Why did God form a covenant with Abraham with his promise to be their God? Because he wanted a people who would radiate his love to the world.

Why did he send his Son?

'For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.'

Many people read this verse wrongly. They understand "God so loved the world" to mean that God loved the world so much: God 'so' loved the world.

However, the verse is not just describing an emotion, or the intensity of God's feeling for us.

We should really translate like this: 'God loved the world 'so''. In other words, God loved the world *in this manner*. The verse is not about God's *feelings* but about God's *actions*.

Look at Romans 5:8....

'But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.'

A few weeks ago I sat through a powerful talk by my colleague in Wellington, Bishop Justin Duckworth.

He believes that the greatest burden that people carry in this country is shame. And he believes that it has reached epidemic proportions.

And he describes it this way:

Guilt is how you feel about something you have done.

Shame, on the other hand, is how you feel about who you are.

Shame is no respecter of age it's found right across the generations and each generation finds our own destructive practices in response to it – young people take their own lives, my generations find refuge in alcohol or pornography which only fuels that shame, an older generation just isolates themselves with only the television for company.

Mother Theresa would have totally agreed with Justin. She once wrote: *'The biggest disease today is not leprosy or tuberculosis, but rather the feeling of being unwanted, uncared for and deserted by everybody.'*

Do we understand how radical this is?

Christianity is the only faith that can speak of God's love as a personal reality and experience.

For me it was a song.....

In this benediction at the end of this letter to the Corinthians – this statement is not simply a bald statement listing one of the qualities of God. It is the pronouncement of a blessing; the invitation for God's love to be poured out upon each one of you in a way that radiates from you.

Why the heck to we prefer to remain as bland old Anglicans when week by week we affirm (and are offered) such a promise.

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and finally:

3. The Fellowship of the Holy Spirit.

This one is very short and simple.

The gift of the Holy Spirit is the indwelling presence of the Spirit that enables us, both individually and corporately to live lives of grace and love.