

Nigel Rode Sermon 4th January 2015

Jeremiah 31 :7-14; Ephesians 1 :3-14 ; John 1 :10-18

“GRACE and TRUTH”

We are drawing near to the end of another Christmas season when we have celebrated the birth of the Christ child with carols and festivities but I wonder just how much we have understood or reflected upon what it all truly means.

John, in our Gospel reading at verse 14 wrote “And the Word became flesh and lived among us” and verse 18 ends the passage by stressing that the Word was and is God, and is intimately close to God. John is saying if you want to know who the true God is, then look long and hard at the human being we know as Jesus.

Jesus it seems is identical with the Word who was there from the very start, the Word through whom all things were made, but when God sends the Word into the world, the world, especially the chosen people of Israel, pretends it doesn't recognise him.

Verse 16 tells us that the world has already received grace upon grace, but fresh grace is now needed. The law, given by Moses, points in the right direction, but like Moses himself, it doesn't take us to the promised-land. For that, you need the grace and truth that comes through Jesus, the Messiah, the Son of God.

One of my favourite hymns, that I am sure you will all have sung at least once this Christmas season, is ‘Joy to the World’, music composed by G F Handel and words by Isaac Watts. Opening lines are “Joy to the world, the Lord is come, let earth receive her King”. But in the context of this passage in John's Gospel, it is the third verse that is the most significant “He rules the earth with truth and grace.”

Grace is one of the key words of the Bible. It means mercy or forgiveness; although we don't deserve it, God in his mercy graciously forgives us for all the sins we have ever committed... that is, just as soon as we repent.

The 'Amazing Grace' which the hymn of that name sings about, is the generosity of God's forgiveness, offered to every one of us, even the most wretched of sinners. Grace comes at no cost to ourselves, forgiveness can never be earned – we can never do anything to deserve God's forgiveness, it's simply the fruit of God's love.

St Paul wrote to the Ephesians, as we have heard this morning, 'In Jesus we have redemption the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace that he lavishes on us.'

This is a regular theme that Paul wrote in his letters to churches made up of a mixture of Jews and Gentiles. Paul proclaims that all of us are equally undeserving but we are justified by grace, through faith, not by doing the works commanded by the law.

All Christians pay lip service to this doctrine; but have you ever really taken to heart what it means when it is applied to you as an individual child of God? Because, yes, the exciting line in John's Gospel verse 12 says 'To all who received Jesus, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God.' and that means anyone at all, then and now. You don't have to be born into a particular family or part of the world.

I have heard it said that a Christian is often compared to a light bulb, (no, I'm not referring to the joke about how many Christians does it take to change a light bulb!) just the comparison that a bulb can't shine on its own. The electrical power is there in the mains, but it can only make the light shine if the plug is connected and switched on. Similarly God's power is always available; God is only waiting for us to ask, and he'll gladly give us the strength of will and spiritual determination to do good deeds for God's sake. But we must make the connection; we must pray regularly and sincerely, and then God will give us spiritual strength, or grace, so that we can do anything that God wants us to do.

So grace simply means God's undeserved love, and the power it gives. But somewhat typically, theologians in the Middle -Ages couldn't leave this simple idea alone, and made it complicated. You probably know that they divided God's grace into several different types; *sufficient grace, efficacious or saving grace; habitual or sanctifying grace; actual grace; the grace of orders* and the *inward and spiritual grace* conveyed by the other sacraments. But don't be confused by all this terminology. At its heart, grace simply means the loving relationship between a generous God and his trusting worshippers.

If we were to pick one of those phrases, then the crucial step is 'saving grace', and it is such a little step. God wants to save each one of us from the fear of death and the guilt and power of sin. There's nothing we have to do to earn this saving grace; God can give it to us of his own free will in the second that we ask for it. And that brings me back to the third verse of 'Joy to the world'

"He rules the world with truth and grace

And makes the nations prove

The glories of his righteousness

And wonders of his love and wonders of his love and wonders of his love."

As Children of God, we are so blessed, for as John wrote : "from his fullness we have all received grace upon grace."

Amen