

Grace and gratitude

Over the last few weeks, in church, we've looked at different parts of the bible:

From Luke's gospel (13:10-17), we heard how Jesus exposed the synagogue leader's hypocrisy over working on the sabbath, and how we shouldn't get tied up in rules and regulations that don't help us – because God's commands for us are for our own good.

Then, from the letter to the Hebrews (13:1-8,5-16), we heard how the writer implored us to do the right thing: To praise God in our songs and words, and also in our actions and in our lives; and to love our brothers and sisters and our neighbours too. We were challenged to remember people in prison and people who are suffering, and to be honest in our dealings. To live as God's people.

Last week, our reading was from Deuteronomy (30:15-20) – Moses' last sermon to the Israelites. We were challenged to choose life, and to choose blessings. Moses called on his people – and us – *“to love the Lord your God, to walk in obedience to him, and to keep his commands, decrees and laws; then you will live and increase, and the Lord your God will bless you.”* (verse 16).

So, across a gospel reading, an epistle reading and an Old Testament reading, we've heard a lot about what we should be doing. How we should be acting. What our attitude should be.

On top of that, I've reflected a couple of times on giving. On what it means to be a cheerful giver. On what it means to give generously.

Over the last month, there has certainly been a lot of instruction. A lot of rules and guidelines - even with the caution that came to us from the gospel reading from four weeks ago about not getting tied in rules and regulation!

We try to do the right thing, of course: we try to not burdens on others, we try to do the right thing – to love our neighbours, to act honestly, to support to those in need, to love God, to walk in God's ways and to give generously. We try to be good followers of Jesus. To be good Christians.

And not only that, we try to share our faith – the good news of Jesus – with those around us. We try to read and meditate on the scriptures. And, of course, we also try to pray often, and not just for ourselves, but for all people, and the whole world.

We try. We try to do all these things, all these good things. And indeed, they are, truly good things.

We try, but we fail. We may not fail at all the things that we should be doing, or indeed we may not fail all the time at those things. But we fail. It turns out that all of us fall short.

But God loves us anyway.

In fact, God loves us so much that, as John's gospel tells us, God gave his only son for us.

Despite thousands of years of history, of people not doing the right thing, of people intentionally turning away from God, God gave his son for us.

I think this is something that we who are Christians know. We know it well. We know it in our heads. But we don't always know it – or accept it – in our hearts.

If we were to randomly survey Christians in the street, and ask them what they did to deserve God's grace, what do you think they'd say?

My guess is that they'd get the answer right: "Nothing". But I suspect that most of them – most of us – would, in the back of their mind be coming up with a list of things that they had done to deserve God's favour (I've been to church almost every Sunday... I taught Sunday school for a year, I'm on the rosters at church, I pray the Lord's prayer regularly, I give to the church and I give to charity, I had my children baptised... and so on).

Back in 2017, we celebrated the 500th anniversary of the Reformation – and I went to a celebration of the anniversary at Booragul Uniting Church (at Lake Macquarie), and there was a series of speakers on the 'five solas' of the reformation: Sola Scriptura, Solus Christus, Sola Gratia, Sola Fide, and Soli Deo Gloria – or, in English: scripture alone, Christ alone, grace alone, faith alone and the glory of God alone.

Dr Ben Myers, who was a lecturer at UTC at the time, spoke on Sola Gratia – Grace alone. Ben reflected that we all understand 'grace alone' but that we all have trouble believing it. I remember him saying something like "It's as if grace is against human nature". It's not fair. He commented that new Christians will understand grace, but a month after they've become Christians, they'll be deeply worried that they're not reading the bible enough, praying enough, giving enough and so on.

Grace does, I think, go against human nature. Because grace is divine.

And it is not fair – or at least it's not 'fair' in human terms.

We don't deserve God's grace – and yet, through Jesus' death and resurrection – we can all receive it. No matter who we are or what we have done.

And this is reflected in our reading this morning from Paul's first letter to Timothy. Paul begins by saying this:

"I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength, that he considered me trustworthy, appointing me to his service. 13 Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief." (1:12-13).

Paul says he was a blasphemer, a persecutor and a violent man. We read about him in the early part of the book of Acts – he stood by and watched with approval as Stephen, a faithful servant of God, was stoned to death. Paul arrested men, women and children, simply because they'd begun following Jesus.

And yet, and yet, God saved him. There's no way Paul had earned God's favour, if you think about what he'd been doing, if anything, he would have earned God's anger: but God showed him favour anyway, and Paul was grateful. And in response in God's grace, out of

gratitude for the mercy God had shown him, he became a great and faithful servant of God, sharing the good news of Jesus across the known world.

We're going to sing 'Amazing grace' as our next hymn, and you might remember John Newton's words from that hymn "Amazing grace... that saved a wretch like me". God's grace, God's amazing grace, saved a wretch like John Newton. And John Newton was a slaver.

And God's grace saved a wretch like Paul, the blasphemer, the persecutor, the violent man.

We might not be slavers, we might not even be particularly blasphemers, or persecutors of the church or even people of violence. But God's amazing grace is there for us too. For each one of us, no matter what we've done, or how bad we've been, or even if we've been just quietly getting on with our lives.

And God's amazing grace is there no matter how much we fail to be exemplary Christians, too.

Paul goes on to say "*The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.*" (1:14) and that's how it is for all of us. The grace of the Lord is abundantly poured out for us all. We can't 'earn' any more grace, and nor are we ever going to 'use it up'.

So that we don't have any doubt about the availability of God's grace to all people, Paul goes on to say that "*Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst.*" (1:15)

Trust what I am writing to you, Paul says, Jesus came to save sinners. He came to save people who did the wrong thing. He came to save people who do the wrong thing. People like us. And then he says he knows this because he is the biggest sinner. Well, Paul's claim to be 'the worst' might be hyperbole, but Paul was as bad as anyone. He was in need of God's grace as much as anyone.

And yet, he knows, and he writes confidently to Timothy – and us – that he is saved. Jesus saved a wretch like Paul.

People often assume that churches are full of good people. That God only wants good people as his followers. But Jesus said he came to save sinners, not the righteous. And if you think about it, if in fact there was nothing wrong, you wouldn't need to be saved.

We can all look at our lives and see things that are wrong, things that we know should be changed but we lack the means – or maybe the motivation – to change them. And we can look at our society and our world and see things that we know are wrong, but again we lack the means or the motivation to fix them.

I've shared this story before, but it's a good one, and some of you may not have heard it: There was a pastor at the shops one day, and he got talking to a stranger, and being a good pastor, he invited the stranger to come to church. "Oh no," said the stranger, "I couldn't do that! There are too many hypocrites there".

Don't worry about that, said the pastor, there's always room for one more!

As the old bumper sticker said: "Christians aren't perfect, just forgiven"

Or as Paul puts it in today's reading: *"Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners."* (1:15)

Paul admits he was a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence – as bad as anyone – but he received God's mercy and forgiveness. He received God's grace.

But Paul didn't leave it there, because he responded to that grace. He showed gratitude for grace. And he tells us *"...I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his immense patience as an example for those who would believe in him and receive eternal life."* (1:16)

Paul proclaimed the message of Jesus consistently and eloquently throughout the rest of his life. His faith in Jesus as the way to God was grounded in the truth of who he knew Jesus to be. To Paul, it was all about Jesus -- his preaching was filled with Jesus' mercy, grace, forgiveness, his death, his resurrection, and his gift of everlasting life. His loyalty to Jesus was consistent throughout his entire ministry, and he never wavered. He told everyone he could about Jesus – and as we read through the book of Acts we see time and time again that Paul wouldn't stop talking about Jesus even when he faced persecution, beatings, imprisonment or even death.

So, from being a persecutor of Christians, Paul became an example for the Christians. Of course, that didn't happen instantly, because he notes that Jesus displayed the utmost patience with him as he changed.

There's a saying that Jesus meets us wherever we are, but he isn't content to let us stay there. Sure enough, if we turn to Jesus, as we grow in our faith, we will be changed... we won't be made perfect this side of the new creation, but we will be changed. Just as Paul the persecutor was. Just as John Newton the slaver was.

It probably won't be an easy or smooth change, but Jesus will be patient with us. No matter how many times we do the wrong thing, how many times we fail, Jesus will still love us, God's grace is still there for us, and he will still forgive us. As John Newton wrote "God's grace has brought me safe thus far, and grace will lead me home."

God's grace shown in Jesus, does go against human nature. It is not fair in human terms. And yet it is God's great gift to us all through the death and resurrection of Jesus. It is truly amazing grace. Charles Wesley writes in another great hymn "Died he for me who caused his pain, for me, who him to death pursued? Amazing love! How can it be, that thou, my God, shouldst die for me."

Truly amazing grace.

Of course, God calls us to do things in response to that amazing grace. There are things that we need to do support and maintain our congregation and our church. And we all have our part to play in God's plan for our lives and the world. We need to make sure that our faith is

in Jesus, not in our works or the works of the church. And we need to remember that, even if we fail, even if we fall short, God's grace is there for us. Always.

As Paul concludes: *Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honour and glory for ever and ever.*

Amen.