

Looking forward

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

That's how Paul opens his first letter to the Corinthians – well, that's verse 3, in verses 1 and 2 he introduces himself, and says who the letter is addressed to. But verse three begins with “Grace and peace to you”.

The “grace” which we receive “from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” - and for that matter from the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:4) – that grace is more than just undeserved forgiveness, although God's forgiveness is part of God's grace. Grace is also empowering for us (1 Corinthians 3:10, 1 Corinthians 15:10) to be witnesses to Jesus. And not only empowering us, but equipping us as well.

Paul doesn't simply offer the Corinthians grace in his greeting, but he adds “peace” – “Grace to you and peace”. Peace, of course, is the traditional Hebrew greeting “Shalom”. Peace in this sense doesn't just mean the absence of conflict among ourselves or even in the world, but it is about peace with God. Reconciliation with God, and covering lasting health, well-being, rest, and harmony.

Having greeted the Corinthians with grace and peace, Paul tells them – and us – the source of that grace and peace, “from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” We can't have God's grace without Jesus. And neither can we have God's peace without Jesus.

Jesus is the only way we have access to the grace and peace of God – remember that Jesus said “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” (John 14:6). That might sound limiting... but it's not, because we know that Jesus came for all people – Jesus' offer of salvation is for all people. Jesus himself said God so loved the world that he gave his only son, so that whoever believes in him may not die but have eternal life. The offer is there for anyone – and for everyone – all they need to do in response to that offer is to put their trust in Jesus, and they will receive the grace and peace that Paul talks about.

Next Paul tells them that he thanks to God for the church at Corinth (1 Corinthians 1:4) – which wasn't a single congregation which met in a single building – but he was writing to all the followers of Jesus in the city of Corinth. Paul knows the people of the church at Corinth as a blessing from God, as he tells them that they have been blessed, writing “For in him you have been enriched in every way—with all kinds of speech and with all knowledge — God thus confirming our testimony about Christ among you. Therefore you do not lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed.” (1:5-7)

He's building them up. He's assuring them of their importance to God, and he's recognising the way that God has equipped and strengthened them to be his church. This is important because later in his letter, Paul has some tough things to say to them. The church in Corinth was going astray in some ways, and later in this letter, Paul corrects them.

Of course, it wasn't just the Corinthian church that was going off track – most of Paul's letters address specific problems in the various churches he was writing to. But whenever Paul corrects or admonishes, he frames it against what is good. He doesn't just tell them what they have to correct, but he reminds them of the grace and the peace of God.

I reckon that's a great principle for us to follow, too. So often we – people in general – focus on the problems of the world and our lives and the negative things to the extent that we forget the good things.

But not only does Paul praise God for the Corinthians, but he assures them of the hope that they have – that he shares with them (and indeed, we share with them). “... so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ”. (1:7)

He’s telling them that not only is there something to look forward too, but that they have everything they need to get there. There is a hope – and you, as followers of Jesus – will receive that hope.

It would have been easy for the Corinthians to look at the world around them and despair. They were a minority in a multi-faith society. What difference could they make?

It’s easy for us to do the same – to look at the world around us and despair. Increasingly a minority in a multi-faith or faith-less society. A church struggling to engage with those around us. A church struggling to make a difference in a world that increasingly regards the church as irrelevant.

So we need to hold on to the hope that we have – the hope that Paul told the Corinthians about. And not only hold on to that hope, but be assured that we have every spiritual gift that we need to get there.

And it’s not going to be easy, but we’re not alone on that journey: we read in verse 8 that “He will also keep you firm to the end,”

God will keep us firm. God will strengthen us!

At the beginning of verse 9, Paul reminds us that “God is faithful,” Our own faith may not be strong, but God is always faithful to his people. In the book of Daniel (6:26b) we read “For he is the living God, enduring forever. His kingdom shall never be destroyed, and his dominion has no end.” Or as we often sing from Psalm 46:1-3, “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea; though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble with its tumult.”

No matter what happens in the world or in our lives, God will be there for us.

Later in in this letter to the Corinthians, Paul tells his readers “No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it.”

Earlier this year in church, we looked at the testing of Abraham – when God sent Abraham to a far mountain to sacrifice his son Isaac. It is testing that is unimaginably hard, but through those three days, through that time, God strengthened Abraham. And in the end, we know that God provided the ram for sacrifice in place of Isaac.

We always think of Abraham as being faithful to God, but how much more was God faithful to Abraham?

And God will be faithful to us and strengthen us too.

And the point of that strengthening is “so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

God strengthens us so that we can remain faithful to him always.

And all the time, God is faithful to us... Paul says “God is faithful, who has called you into fellowship with his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.” (1:9)

God calls us into the fellowship with his Son (1 Corinthians 1:9). We may think that we enter into fellowship with Jesus when we decide to follow him, but we only do so because God has called us. When we do that, we become part of the church – not simply St Ives Uniting or the Uniting Church in Australia, but the church across the world and across the years, the one holy catholic and apostolic church – the body of Christ. We become part of that body – that fellowship – when we decide to follow Jesus, and that fellowship continues throughout our lives, and lasts forever.

It is good news. God reached out to each one of us – and to the whole world – even though we didn't deserve it by sending his Son into the world. To show us the way to reconciliation with God, and in his death and resurrection to open our path to everlasting life: peace – shalom – with God.

And so we praise God. And so we give God thanks.

Today is the first Sunday of Advent, and while the rest of the world might be counting down to Christmas, we can look beyond that to what Paul calls the day of the Lord Jesus Christ. That time when Jesus will return to put all things right. We can still celebrate Christmas, of course – I certainly will be.

The season of advent for us starts today, on the first Sunday of Advent. But commercial advent started last Friday – the first of December, and you can go out and buy calendars where you open a section each day and get a present, usually a disappointingly small piece of chocolate, but there are other options - I strongly recommend Lego advent calendars, but there are plenty of others.

And through the season of Advent, over the next few weeks, things will intensify until they reach fever pitch on Christmas Eve. And then the shops will finally close, all the postal deliveries will have arrived, and all the presents will be wrapped. And the fridges filled to capacity. And the children will be sleeping soundly...

And then it'll all be over in a flash. The presents torn open. Immense quantities of food consumed.

And then we'll have boxing day! And we can take the boxes and wrapping paper out to our recycling bins, and feast on leftovers as we watch the cricket and the yachting.

So many things in our society count down to Christmas... and then nothing. Or if not nothing, then something not very exciting. Christmas is the climax. And Advent is generally regarded as the countdown to Christmas, right?

The word 'advent' means 'coming' – in the sense of 'arrival' or 'beginning' or 'start', and it's the time of the church year when we should be focusing on – and looking forward to – the Second Coming of Jesus, when all that he came to earth to accomplish when he was born as a baby in Bethlehem, will be fulfilled, will be completed.

As we heard in our gospel reading today, we don't know when the day of our Lord Jesus Christ will be - but we do know that it will come, and we know it gets closer every day. We are nearly 2000 years closer to that day than when Paul wrote his first letter to the Corinthians. And we're a year closer than we were when we celebrated Advent 2022. And we're a day closer to the day when Jesus will return to put all things right than we were yesterday.

We can't count down to it, but we do need to look forward to it, to expect it, and to respond to that expectation.

We shouldn't be living as if this world will last forever. And we shouldn't be living doing whatever we want for ourselves, without regard for God and without regard for other people.

And we do that, by living as the people of God. Living as God wants us to live. Trusting in God, trusting in the salvation Jesus has won for us by his death on the cross. Relying not on our own strength, but on God's strength. Using the spiritual gifts that God has given us.

This Advent, let's not just count down to just a day's celebration, but look forward to a bright and everlasting future.

A future to which God calls us, and for which God strengthens us.

And let us respond with praise and thanksgiving.

Amen.