

Grace, Peace and Faithfulness

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

Those are the words of the apostle Paul sending his greetings to the church in Corinth as we heard in this morning’s New Testament reading. It’s not simply a nice greeting: it’s a rich and loving greeting as well, and it’s not just a greeting to the Corinthian Church but as well it’s a greeting to the whole church – to all those people who are brothers and sisters in Christ throughout the ages. From the people in Corinth in the middle of the first century AD, to all of us gathered here today – and indeed across the world – and to all the people yet to come.

Paul says “Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ”. His greeting is in the name of the Father and the Son. The grace and peace of God comes to us through Jesus – Paul puts the Father and the Son together. The grace and peace of the Father comes only through the Son, and the grace and peace that the Son, Jesus, brings to people comes only from God the Father.

And what Paul desires for the people of Corinth, he tells us, is grace and peace. Grace - the undeserved love of God - shown once and for all in Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection. And peace, the peace that comes from that grace, peace not just between each other, but between us and God.

So, as Paul says, “Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”

And while I think that is the key verse of the opening of Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians, it’s not the first verse. In the custom of the time, Paul begins by telling his readers who he is: “[from] Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and our brother Sosthenes”.

He is Paul, and he announces that he is an apostle of Christ Jesus. That’s a big claim, and to be an apostle carries great weight. And throughout his letters, and throughout the book of Acts, Paul does claim authority. In modern times, he’s sometimes regarded as being elite and arrogant, and that certainly fits his background as a Pharisee. But he doesn’t make the claim of apostleship because of his background, or his religious training, or through his extensive service to the early church – instead he makes it absolutely clear that he was called by the will of God to be an apostle of Christ Jesus.

It’s a big claim that Paul makes - but it is a claim of the grace of God, not of his own merit.

And Paul also extends greetings from Sosthenes. We don’t know much about Sosthenes, although from his name we can know that he was clearly of Greek rather than a Hebrew – Jewish – background as Saul was.

And then, having introduced himself, and claimed the authority of being an Apostle, Paul goes on to state who he’s writing this letter to:

“To the church of God in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be his holy people, together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ—their Lord and ours:”

As we read on through the first letter to the Corinthians, we come to know the reasons for the letter. There are problems in Corinth. Within the church there. Not major issues generally in terms of doctrine or theology, but problems about how the church, about how all the brothers and sisters in Christ relate to each other, and how they work together as the church.

I’m sure we can relate. Not here in St Ives of course, but we know about the wider church. We know of, even if we’re not involved in, arguments about some pretty major issues – about theology, about

who should be ordained, about who we should marry, and so on. And about other issues too, about music, and maintenance of church buildings and seating in church, and worship times and so on.

While we might sort of equate the Church in Corinth with the Church in St Ives, and although we probably all know the 'church' isn't a building or even simply a group of people, we do tend to hear the word 'church' and think of 'congregation, in a certain place'. But it seems that there wasn't one church in Corinth in terms of a building or a congregation, but many. So when we read 'the church of God which is in Corinth' we shouldn't be thinking of it in terms of St Ives Uniting Church, but rather something much more like Sydney Central Coast Presbytery.

And if you've ever been to a presbytery meeting – well, you'll know that there are all sorts of opinions and ideas and desires. And if you go to the various congregations that make up the presbytery for worship services you will find all sorts of differences. I've taken services at more than a dozen or so congregations within the presbytery, and they're all different – but they all come together to make up the presbytery.

They're all different - and from time to time, some of those differences cause friction.

And so it would have been with the Church in Corinth.

But I guess the Church in Corinth were fortunate in being able to write to Paul for help. I suppose we might try writing to our moderator, or the president of our assembly; and our Catholic and Anglican brothers and sisters might write to bishops and archbishops for help and advice. But it's not quite the same.

As we read the letter to the Corinthians, though, we can see that many of the problems confronting the church in Corinth in the middle of the first century AD weren't that different from many of the problems confronting the church in Sydney in the twenty first century AD.

So Paul's advice and wisdom and teaching is for us today, just as much as it was for the Corinthians back then.

Paul is explicitly writing to the whole church, not just those who are living in Corinth. And what binds that church together is not a common heritage and not worship practice and not geography, instead, what binds that church together is Jesus. Paul is really keen to remind his readers of that – in the first nine verses of this letter, the name Jesus appears nine times – and his title of Christ appears twice more.

Having introduced himself, and having put his readers into the context of being the whole church, Paul goes on to give that wonderful greeting:

"Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." (1:3)

And having greeted the people, he gives thanks for them:

I always thank my God for you because of his grace given you in Christ Jesus. (1:4)

Again, he writes about the Grace of God which has been given through Jesus, and he is thankful not just for the grace that has himself has received, but also thankful for the grace that has been shown to all people. We often, I think, forget that grace – we might sing Amazing Grace, but do we appreciate how amazing it is? The grace that save a wretch like me? Was lost, but now found, blind but now see!?

God has been faithful to his people: that grace is not just for all of us gathered here, but for all people, for all who accept the grace of God through Jesus Christ.

Because, Paul writes, “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)

That is a bit daunting... Paul tells us that we’ve become enriched in every way - including all kinds of speech and knowledge? We have been given every spiritual gift we need? Is that right? How did that happen? When did it happen?

But I think the key to understanding what Paul is saying here is to understand that all that is needed to be done has been done. In Jesus’ death and resurrection, we are saved – not will be saved or might be saved, but are saved. Death, for those who turn to Christ, has been conquered. The gospel – the good news of Jesus – that we’ve heard, and taken into our hearts, is all that we need to hear.

Our faith has no secret knowledge. No secrets or special knowledge are revealed when we’re baptised or confirmed or ordained. The Christian faith is there for all to see, all to know. The story of God who sent his only begotten Son into his own creation not to judge it or to punish it, but to save it, is for everyone.

And there is a reassurance that there is a day that will come when Jesus will return and all things will be put right. Paul talks about the people waiting for that day, when our Lord Jesus Christ will be revealed, with the same authority and the same certainty as the rest of his letter.

God has been faithful to his promises, and God will continue to be faithful to his promises.

So we, and the whole church, wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed. Or as the Nicene Creed puts it, “He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end.”

Now talk of Christ’s return or the ‘end days’ is always a little uncomfortable, and there is a danger in speculating about it and becoming obsessed with such things, but I think there’s also a danger in ignoring what we do know.

As I’ve said before, what we do learn throughout the scriptures of the return of Christ shouldn’t be scary. Rather than us being afraid, we should be assured by the promised return of Jesus.

I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but there is a lot of stuff wrong with the world. A few years ago, I had a stint standing in for Steve Aynsley at Pymble Uniting, and part of that involved me teaching Year 5 scripture. Every week. At three different schools. It was not my favourite ministry experience. But in my year 5 scripture classes I asked them to nominate what was wrong with the world – and while they were a bit hesitant at first, once they started, they had no problem coming up with list upon list. And they were ten year olds – those of us who are a bit older can come up with longer lists, I’m sure.

And one of the obvious ones for those in the church are all the empty seats in our buildings on Sunday mornings. The declining offertory. Funerals that outnumber baptisms and so on.

And in our city, the gap between rich and poor increases. Homelessness increases. Loneliness increases. Depression increases. And this is in one of the most prosperous, most livable cities in one of the most prosperous and most livable cities in the world.

There are now more refugees now than at any point in in history. The Russian Invasion of Ukraine continues. Conflicts rage. Metaphorical sabres are rattled all over the place.

But of course it's not all bad news.

Apparently, during the 20th century humans were less likely to die at the hands of another human than at any time in the past – and that was despite two world wars, the Armenian Genocide, the holocaust, Stalin, Pol Pot and all the rest.

I do think though, that a few thousand years of history, proves what the people of God have always known – that the world is fallen. That people – even with all the good will and all the technology they can create – cannot solve the problems of the world.

We can – and we should – do what we can to make things better. To make peace, to feed the hungry, to free the oppressed, to cure the sick, and befriend the lonely and the outcast. But ultimately, we need to trust not in our own efforts, but in God, God who has been faithful and who continues to be faithful.

Paul writes that “He will also keep you firm to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.” (1:8) Once again, he reminds us that God's grace, through Jesus, has saved us. It is sufficient. We will be faultless on the Day of our Lord Jesus Christ. We won't be judged on what we have or haven't done, but rather, on whom we rely. Who we have put our trust in.

Our NIV translation tells us at the beginning of verse 9 that “God is faithful” but the Good News translation gives us something simpler – but perhaps even more definite “God is to be trusted”.

So often, in church, we talk about faith and faithfulness. That we must put our faith in Christ. Or we say, as the disciples did “Lord, increase our faith”. But we need to remember Jesus' answer to the disciples: “If you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mulberry tree, ‘Be uprooted and planted in the sea,’ and it will obey you.” (Luke 17:6)

The amount of our faith isn't important. It is the object of our faith that is. People today have faith in lots of things: In themselves. In science. In luck. In the thought that everything will work out in the end. In the goodness of others. And so on.

But as followers of Christ, our faith is in him, and needs to be in him. And it doesn't matter if our faith is weak or strong, as long as our faith remains in Jesus, then we can be confident in his grace.

God is to be trusted because God is faithful. God never fails and his love is unchanging.

It is not our faithfulness to God that we rely on, instead it is God's faithfulness to us.

Paul's letter to the Corinthians goes on to address many issues, but before he gets to all of that, he lays down the principle on which the whole letter is to be based.

That God's grace is shown for all and Jesus, and that God is faithful.

And that remains the case for us today, and always:

God is faithful, who has called you into fellowship with his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. (1:9)

