

Sermon on Grace
Cashmere Presbyterian Church, Sunday 13 October 2019.

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Bible Readings

Luke 17:11-19

Romans 5:15-21

My last sermon took you to the year 1546, to a vast luxurious archbishop's palace on the east coast of Scotland, St Andrews, to the heady early days of the Reformation, to one day in particular when the keen young reformers killed the archbishop and took over his palace for one dramatic and formative year.

In this sermon I am taking you exactly one hundred years on, to the year 1646, and we are moving south to the very heart of power, to Westminster Cathedral. By the year 1646 the church in Scotland had become presbyterian. Bishops were gone, though not after a prolonged fight. Church leadership was in the hands of elected councils of elders.

The church in England was still, however, in upheaval. The King favoured bishops, but the Parliament favoured councils. But this was no polite theological debate. They were at war. Civil war. Battles raged between armies loyal to King Charles the 1st, and those of the English Parliament, lead of course by Oliver Cromwel. By 1646 the King had lost, and had surrendered to the Scottish army.

In the midst of this murder and mayhem the Parliament called an Assembly to reform the church. In July 1643 they began, 121 duly appointed ministers and theologians from around England, together with observers from Parliament and from Scotland, meeting in Westminster Abbey. For nearly 5 tumultuous years they talked, and argued and talked and argued. Most of the time they were arguing about church governance. Some of them were traditionalists, arguing for bishops. Some of them were congregationalists, arguing for independent local churches. Most, however, were presbyterians, and this won the day. The New Form of Government recommended by the Westminster Assembly was adopted, kind of, in part, by the English government, and some presbyteries were established.

Then, in 1646, they embarked on writing a Confession of Faith. This only took a year. So, by Easter 1648 they had done it – written a Form of Government, a Confession, a Larger and a Shorter Catechism, complete with screeds of proof texts. And they all went home. Their work was embraced wholeheartedly by the church and parliament in Scotland, and it remains to this day the foundational document of the Presbyterian church. In New Zealand, a decade ago, the Presbyterian church argued about it, wrote another statement of faith, and decided to keep the two side by side as our standard of faith.

In England, well, Civil War followed Civil War. King Charles the First was executed. Oliver Cromwell ruled, then died. Then royalists won on the battlefield and King Charles the Second was installed in 1660. He promptly threw out any traces of the Westminster Confession and Form of Government, reinstated the previous episcopal Church of England, and that was that. 5 years of work by the 120 greatest minds of the church quite wasted.

Leaving us with the bizarre irony that the central document of the Church of Scotland was actually written by the Church of England.

So there you have it. The Westminster Confession. Whatever does all this have to do with grace? A central idea in the Westminster Confession is that God makes a Covenant of

Grace with us. But before it gets to grace it confronts the basic problem with humanity. With Adam, claims the Catechism, all humanity fell into a state of sin, our nature corrupted, *“whereby he is utterly indisposed, disabled, and made opposite unto all that is spiritually good, and wholly inclined to all evil, and that continually; which is commonly called Original Sin, from which do proceed all actual transgressions.”*

Original Sin. What do you think of this idea, that you and I and all humanity, from each newborn baby, are wholly inclined to all evil, in our very nature and essence?

I doubt this doctrine has been much preached from this pulpit over the last 90 years. Not the last 50 years anyway. I suspect we are much more inclined towards the idea of Original Blessing, such as that proposed by Matthew Fox, who was in NZ a couple of months ago. He has argued passionately against the Augustinian notion of original sin, claiming instead that a more authentic reading of Jesus’ teachings is that we are grounded in the goodness of creation – “the sacredness of creation and our role in it”. He calls us to celebrate beauty, compassion, justice, mysticism and creativity.

This is expressed rather beautifully by our own Kiwi psalmist, Joy Cowley
“Just Suppose”

This deep and abiding debate threads its way through Christian history and theology. On one side stands the stark, even harsh words of the Westminster Confession, declaring our utter depravity, our utter helplessness to do good or to win our own salvation. On the other side stands the call to see all people as wonderful, priceless, loved by God, accepted and acceptable.

I don’t know about you but of course I prefer the latter. Of course I would prefer original blessing to original sin. I was brought up in a humanist church tradition, which majored on social ethics, care for others, care for the poor. My father dedicated his long career to teaching in places no one else wanted to go to: Nukualofa, Kaikohe, Ruatoria. He heard the call, he responded to the need, because he believed in the potential of all people to stand tall, to learn, to find their place in the world despite lack of material resources. He believed in the good in all people.

As I have grown older, however, I have seen more clearly the deficiencies of humanism. The basic problem is, if people are basically good and if the problems of our world can be solved by people working harder to be good, then why do we need God?
If it’s all about us there is no room for grace.

The word ‘grace’ means at its core, ‘free gift’. In our Christian faith it means the free gift of God to us, grace not earned, not deserved, just gift.

Do you need this gift? Do we need God’s acceptance?

If you are basically OK already, why bother with God at all?

As Kiwis we are pretty committed to the idea that ‘I’m OK’. ‘She’ll be right’. We are not prone to outbursts of vulnerability, we are proud of our respectability.

But what is the truth of the human condition?

Could, possibly, both be true? Could we be **both** utterly helpless **and** bursting with potential? Could we be **both** trapped **and** lovely?

I only know that the older I get the more aware I am of my own need for God. I don’t see it as my role to tell anyone else that they are a depraved sinner. I figure that most people

are hard enough on themselves without theology putting them down. But I do see that each and every person, in their core, does need God to be put right. I do genuinely believe that the human race is lost without Jesus Christ. I do genuinely believe that all the effort and creativity and kindness in the world is not enough to overcome evil. Only the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ on the cross is power enough to build a future on. I do believe that we cannot get to God on our own, by our own efforts or goodness. We are truly helpless.

And this was the central conviction of the 120 men who wrote the Westminster Confession. They saw the central message of scripture that God is God, and people tend to wander around in circles when left to our own devices.

They saw that ultimately, when we mortal creatures step out of these bodies of ours and stand on the brink of eternity, the only thing we can say to God is 'I got nothing'. And if this is true of the end of our lives it is true of all our lives.

We got nothing.

All our strategies and systems, all our forms of government and social welfare, all our fundraising and fellowship, all our buildings and budgets ... it's all nothing, really. It does not in any measure buy us into God's good grace. God's salvation is not for sale. It cannot be bought no matter how hard we try.

All is grace.

And the amazing thing about grace is, when we 'let go and let God', when we accept grace for ourselves and glimpse the possibility that we are indeed loved no matter what, not because or or despite of ourselves ...

when we enter into grace, even just a tiny bit, then it illuminates everything.

Grace changes the way we see other people.

As we see ourselves into the light of God's brilliance we can see only our shadows, our darkness.

But when we turn and see others with God's light behind us, we can see only the light in other people. When we receive God's grace we can relate to others with God's grace.

When we know ourselves forgiven then we can forgive.

When we know how little we deserve the amazing gift of God's salvation, love, and acceptance, then we become less stingy with others, more generous in every way.

This is amazing grace. I'll finish with the words of a contemporary hymn, by Phil Wickham

*Who breaks the power of sin and darkness,
Whose love is mighty and so much stronger?
The King of Glory, the King above all kings
This is amazing grace
This is unfailing love
That You would take my place
That You would bear my cross
You lay down Your life that I would be set free
Jesus, I sing for all that You've done for me*

Just Suppose, by Joy Cowley.

Suppose we're not a fallen people at all,
but a people on the way up;
not caterpillars that once were butterflies,
but actually the other way round.

Just suppose we have this wonderful God
Who is so much in love with us,
He has drawn us out of the animal kingdom,
giving us the divine spark of His love
to grow into a fire within us and eventually
bring us to oneness with Him.

Just suppose this wonderful God
so totally, crazily in love with us,
first became one with His beloved,
taking on a human likeness
to join us in our growing pains,
suffering everything we might suffer,
to show us the truth of the empty chrysalis.

And **just suppose** that our words of fear
like disobedience and judgement and condemnation,
belong not to a God Who is total Love
but to a half-grown people
trying to explain their incompleteness.

Suppose that the ultimate truth
is that God is the source
and destiny of every soul.

Suppose that everything we are,
all our light and shade, our sin and celebration,
belongs wholly in God's love.
Wouldn't that be Good News? (Used with permission.)

How many words can you think of that relate linguistically to the word 'grace'?

Words related to 'Grace'

Greek:

Chari: grace, favour

Charis: pardon

Charism, gift

Latin:

Grati – free, no payment required

Gratia - kindness

Gratus – thankful, pleasing

English

Charity

Gratis

Gratuity

Gratitude

Grace – charm

Grace as a verb, to 'grace' us with your presence

say grace as a prayer before a meal

Gracious

Graceful – charming, lovely, elegant

Grace in theology means: "free unmerited favour, given by God to people"

Charism

Charismatic

Eucharist

This morning we have the Gospel reading of Jesus healing 10 people with leprosy. Only one of them came back to say thank you.

Jesus's healing was an act of pure grace, God's undeserved favour

and the one man's act in returning to say thank you was grace received, appreciated, met in gratitude. Grace and gratitude, free gift and free response. This is amazing grace at work.

Westminster Confession of Faith

Chapter VI: Of the Fall of Man, of Sin, and of the Punishment thereof

I. Our first parents, being seduced by the subtilty and temptation of Satan, sinned, in eating the forbidden fruit.[a] This their sin God was pleased, according to His wise and holy counsel, to permit, having purposed to order it to His own glory.[b]

[a] Gen. 3:13; II Cor. 11:3.

[b] Rom. 11:32

II. By this sin they fell from their original righteousness and communion, with God,[a] and so became dead in sin,[b] and wholly defiled in all the parts and faculties of soul and body.[c]

[a] Gen. 3:6, 7, 8; Eccles. 7:29; Rom. 3:23.

[b] Gen. 2:17; Eph. 2:1.

[c] Tit. 1:15; Gen. 6:5; Jer. 17:9; Rom. 3:10 to 19

III. They being the root of all mankind, the guilt of this sin was imputed,[a] and the same death in sin and corrupted nature conveyed, to all their posterity descending from them by ordinary generation.[b]

[a] Gen. 1:27, 28 & Gen. 2:16, 17 and Acts 17:26 with Rom. 5:12, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19 and I Cor. 15:21, 22, 49.

[b] Ps. 51:5; Gen. 5:3; Job 14:4, Job 15:14

IV. From this original corruption, whereby we are utterly indisposed, disabled, and made opposite to all good,[a] and wholly inclined to all evil,[b] do proceed all actual transgressions.

Shorter Catechism:

Q. 17. Into what estate did the fall bring mankind?

A. The fall brought mankind into an estate of sin and misery [a].

[a]. [Gen. 3:16-19](#), [23](#); [Rom. 3:16](#); [5:12](#); [Eph. 2:1](#)

Q. 18. Wherein consists the sinfulness of that estate whereinto man fell?

A. The sinfulness of that estate whereinto man fell, consists in the guilt of Adam's first sin [a], the want of original righteousness [b], and the corruption of his whole nature [c], which is commonly called *original sin*; together with all actual transgressions which proceed from it [d].

20. Did God leave all mankind to perish in the estate of sin and misery?

A. God having, out of his mere good pleasure, from all eternity, elected some to everlasting life [a,] did enter into a covenant of grace, to deliver them out of the estate of sin and misery, and to bring them into an estate of salvation by a Redeemer [b].

Larger Catechism:

Q25: Wherein consists the sinfulness of that estate whereinto man fell?

A25: The sinfulness of that estate whereinto man fell, consisteth in the guilt of Adam's first sin,[1] the want of that righteousness wherein he was created, and the corruption of his nature, whereby he is utterly indisposed, disabled, and made opposite unto all that is

spiritually good, and wholly inclined to all evil, and that continually;[2] which is commonly called Original Sin, and from which do proceed all actual transgressions.[3]

Q26: How is original sin conveyed from our first parents unto their posterity?

A26: Original sin is conveyed from our first parents unto their posterity by natural generation, so as all that proceed from them in that way are conceived and born in sin.[1]

1. [Psa. 51:5](#); [Job 14:4](#); [15:14](#); [John 3:6](#)

Q27: What misery did the fall bring upon mankind?

A27: The fall brought upon mankind the loss of communion with God,[1] his displeasure and curse; so as we are by nature children of wrath,[2] bond slaves to Satan,[3] and justly liable to all punishments in this world, and that which is to come.[4]

Q30: Doth God leave all mankind to perish in the estate of sin and misery?

A30: God doth not leave all men to perish in the estate of sin and misery,[1] into which they fell by the breach of the first covenant, commonly called the Covenant of Works;[2] but of his mere love and mercy delivereth his elect out of it, and bringeth them into an estate of salvation by the second covenant, commonly called the Covenant of Grace.[3]

Q31: With whom was the covenant of grace made?

A31: The covenant of grace was made with Christ as the second Adam, and in him with all the elect as his seed.[1]

1. [Gal. 3:16](#); [Rom. 5:15-21](#); [Isa. 53:10-11](#)

Q32: How is the grace of God manifested in the second covenant?

A32: The grace of God is manifested in the second covenant, in that he freely provideth and offereth to sinners a Mediator,[1] and life and salvation by him;[2] and requiring faith as the condition to interest them in him, promiseth and giveth his Holy Spirit [3] to all his elect, to work in them that faith,[4] with all other saving graces;[5] and to enable them unto all holy obedience,[5] as the evidence of the truth of their faith [6] and thankfulness to God,[7] and as the way which he hath appointed them to salvation.[8]

Q35: How is the covenant of grace administered under the New Testament?

A35: Under the New Testament, when Christ the substance was exhibited, the same covenant of grace was and still is to be administered in the preaching of the word,[1] and the administration of the sacraments of Baptism [2] and the Lord's Supper;[3] in which grace and salvation are held forth in more fulness, evidence, and efficacy, to all nations.[4]

1. [Mark 16:15](#)

2. [Matt. 28:19-20](#)

3. [I Cor. 11:23-25](#)

4. [II Cor. 3:6-9](#); [Heb. 8:6, 10-11](#); [Matt. 28:19](#)

Q36: Who is the Mediator of the covenant of grace?

A36: The only Mediator of the covenant of grace is the Lord Jesus Christ,[1] who, being the eternal Son of God, of one substance and equal with the Father,[2] in the fulness of time became man,[3] and so was and continues to be God and man, in two entire distinct natures, and one person, forever.[4]