

Ash Wednesday 5 March 2014

2 Corinthians 5:20-6:10 and John 8:1-11

Do not accept the grace of God in vain!

In other words be serious about it. Be serious about it in the sense that we recognise it for what it is. I don't think it is something we have to be straight faced about – for it is a wonderful refreshing thing that brings us life, but it is something to be taken seriously. Grace is a gift from God. It's not a mark to show that we are tolerated with all our little (and not so little) quirks and foibles. Grace is an undeserved setting aside of all the rotten horrible things we do to each other and to ourselves. I say undeserved, but it does demand something from us first. And that will be demanded of us in the service.

In the invitation we had to this service and indeed to the whole of Lent, we are encouraged to start off on a path that leads to Good Friday and then to the Easter celebrations. This beginning today is marked by reflection and penitence, reflecting on our own mortality and recognising where we need to repent. We are given an opportunity to receive God's grace and blessing and encouraged not to squander it or take it lightly.

The elements in this service which follow, invite us to call to mind those things which get in the way of good relationships with each other, with God and with the wider world. And the reason we do this is to know God's mercy and to be the means by which God's glory is shown in the world. We move from repentance, through forgiveness to an awareness of God's grace. This evening is the opportunity we have to focus on ourselves, our Lent programme for house groups gives the opportunity to listen to others and to reflect on some of the big questions of life.

I suggest we give ourselves the opportunity to experience the whole part of that process. Don't get stuck in any one part or leap forward to the good bit. Yes, linger properly over our iniquities so that we recognise them for that they are and for the hurt and pain they cause us and others, but don't wallow in them. Accept forgiveness and then move into changing so that established patterns of behaviour and speech begin to break down into a better way of being, that better reflects God's mercy and grace.

Both our readings encourage us to face up to our sin. To bring it out into the light. To name it for what it is. When Jesus challenges the men in the gospel reading, they have to recognise that they are sinful, but they leave before they have benefit of the response. Because Jesus then takes that further with the woman, he doesn't ask for or is given excuses. It is acknowledged between them that she has done wrong. Instead he gives her a challenge, a call to transformation. The sin is named, owned up to, acknowledged and then it is put aside.

I'm ashamed of (at least) two things I do wrong and try as I might I find it hard to move into ways of preventing them from happening again.

I'm ashamed that I will ignore another person's anger or upset at a situation, when they want a response from me, because I lack courage to face up to the way that it makes me feel, let alone having courage to face their anger.

I'm ashamed that I will join in gossip that is often in the guise of supporting others when really it just makes us feel superior to the person we are running down.

I feel that I'm continually asking for forgiveness. Do you feel that way too? I know that the gracious and forgiving spirit of Jesus will give me that, but am I taking God's grace in vain? Or am I making God out to be a ferociously hard task master? I take encouragement that even St. Paul says that he continues to do that which he knows he shouldn't and not to do that which he should. For God's grace means that I am not left to simply strive on my own. The Holy Spirit will be working with me, within me, to keep nudging me onwards. To give me courage where I lack it. To put a bridle on my tongue when it is needed. To give me a clear view of when I have failed and to bring me back to acknowledge it and to move on again. Nudging me onwards.

Paul encourages us to respond to abuse, suffering, hardship, hard work, sleepless nights and so on, with patience, kindness, generous love, knowledge and so on. He notes that he has experienced both glory and shame and slander and praise.

Tom Wright has an interesting reflection on the responses often seen in Christian groups to the question of authenticity and the balance between everything all being well or all being awful. He says: 'Christians sometimes talk as if life were simply a matter of glory, of celebration, of the Lord providing all our needs and everything going forward without a hitch. Nobody actually lives like that all of the time, of course, and the effort to go on believing in it in the face of the evidence can produce a double life, with all the dangers of hypocrisy or shallowness. Equally, some people – including Christians – react so forcibly to a grinning, shallow, falsely cheerful spirituality that they make out that everything is gloomy and filled with trouble, a constant round of difficulty and frustration.' He suggests that our lives will have a lot of both – of trouble, difficulty and suffering while at the same time we can find in it generosity, kindness and so forth. We should be able to grieve and rejoice at the same time, to share pain and joy and the tears and laughter.

If that is what knowing God's grace means, then I want part of that. I want to share in that amalgam of human experience. But I want to do so having a right view of my own shortcomings, to learn when I need to repent and to have courage to accept forgiveness and to change those things that God has shone a light on to. I want to answer that call to transformation.

May God bless us as we take the opportunities that this service gives us, the opportunities that this period of Lent will give us, in home groups, in our worship together and in the ways we respond to those around us.

May the gift of God's grace not be in vain.

Amen

Sarah Thomas 5 March 2014