



Dr Janet Bottoms: Reflections, 2nd January 2022

Readings: Jeremiah 31: 7-9, John 1: 10-18; Ephesians 1: 3-14

Reflection on John 1: 10-14

*“And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. . . . From his fullness we have all received, **grace upon grace.**”*

What an astounding claim that is. The Word that was before anything was, the power and the glory, became flesh, physical body, constrained within the limits of time and space and mortality, and yet, within that smallness, and within the limits of our understanding, showing us God, immense in grace and truth and steadfastness. This is what we have been celebrating over the past days.

But what I want to focus on today is that phrase “grace upon grace”- grace and then more grace out of the fullness of God; God's grace in different forms. For as the passage continues, “The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ”. Grace and then more Grace.

It's important we notice that there is no “but” between the two parts of that sentence. They are equally balanced. The law, or as I would prefer to say “the covenant”, was a gift of God's grace. So was Jesus, the Christ. Both come to us out of the fullness of God. Tidings of comfort and joy, indeed.

Books can and have been written on the subject of God's Grace, and I am not a theologian, yet the idea of Grace is, in a way, simple. It is favour, that is approval or support, shown to someone. It is a gift or a kindness, and it creates a relationship -one that is almost inevitably unequal – between the giver and the receiver. Where the relationship is one that is so unequal as that between the God of heaven and earth, the grace of God, it has been described as “unconditional love toward a person who does not deserve it,” or, in the lovely words of John Stott, “Grace is love that cares and stoops and rescues.”

That is what the Bible shows us, running through it like a recurrent musical motif. We heard the sound of it in our reading from Jeremiah.

See, I am going to bring them from the land of the north, and gather them from the farthest parts of the earth, among them the blind and the lame, those with child and those in labour, together; a great company, they shall return. With weeping they shall come, and with consolations I will lead them back..... for I have become a father to Israel, and Ephraim is my firstborn.....”

Failing, rebellious, foolish Israel, or “the children of Israel”.

Or again, as we read in Hosea 11:8:

How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel? My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender.

Grace upon Grace, like the relationship of a loving parent to a constantly erring child, and from the call to Abraham, and then the one to Moses, it is God who initiates the relationship, God who is constantly calling and recalling, rescuing, and forgiving his forgetful and rebellious people.

God offers them a covenant of grace, “*You shall be my people and I will be your God*” [Jeremiah 30], Yet even after he had brought them out of Egypt, out of slavery,

and even while Moses was on Sinai waiting to hear God's word on their behalf, and because he stayed away longer than they expected, the people decided they needed their own god – one they could see – could hold and control – their golden calf. And it was after this first betrayal of the covenant, a betrayal that would be repeated so many times, that God spoke to Moses and named Himself as the Lord who is “*merciful and gracious, slow to anger; abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin.*” [Exodus 34: 6] This God freely enters into covenant with them, and with us, promising to be with them, but requiring in return that they should love the Lord their God, with heart and soul and mind and strength.

How essential that first word of the covenant is. It is a powerful defence or weapon against our human tendency to love ourselves first, to see the world from our perspective, centred on us (or on me), and the rest of it there for our convenience and purposes. No wonder, if we find the first law difficult, that we also find it difficult to love our neighbours as ourselves. No wonder that the prophets were continually speaking of God's anger and grief and pain when his people turned to their own devices, and yet also, and continually, showing us a God who is always seeking them, calling, loving and offering them restoration. This is the Grace of God. Finally, out of this steadfast love He gave us Jesus, full of His own “*grace and truth*”. “*The Word became flesh and lived among us.*” Grace upon Grace.

Apparently, a literal translation of “lived” or “dwelt”, in that verse, would be ‘pitched his tent’ among, or in the midst of us. During the years of wilderness journeying, and before the children of Israel settled down and built a temple, the ark of the covenant was kept in a tent, alone. This was the “tent of meeting”, the place where Moses would go to speak with God, but it was placed outside the camp, separate, holy. When, in God's grace, the Word was made flesh it dwelt among us, “*and we have seen his glory*, writes John, *the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.*” Steadfastness, faithfulness, and integrity – ie. truth to his own nature – the visible image of the true nature of the invisible God.

But how could they, and how can we, “behold his glory”? John can't just mean resurrection glory, or even what we call the Transfiguration, a single event. It must have been something about the way he lived, day by day; the way he taught; the way he loved, healed the sick, associated with the outcasts. It must have been his charisma, a Greek word meaning “favour freely given” or “a gift of grace”. It must have been the Grace of God shining through with magnetic, compelling power. Many people felt it. “All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his lips”, we are told. Even the temple guards who were sent to arrest him the first time came back empty-handed saying, “No one ever spoke the way this man does.”

But perhaps it is most visible in his re-interpretation or refreshing of the Law that, in human understanding, had become so distorted, so oppressive and restrictive. This was what appeared most “gracious” to the crowds and most challenging to the powerful and complacent. When they asked why he would associate with and eat with sinners and outcasts, he referred them back to the prophets and the scriptures – “Go and learn what this means: ‘*I desire mercy, not sacrifice.*’, says Jesus, quoting from the book of Hosea [6;6]; *For I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings.*” What did that say about God's attitude to the Temple, to hierarchies of priests, sacrifices, and the various ways of excluding the gentiles, or the ritually unclean, or “sinners” or women? What grace was on offer for them in the Law as it had been interpreted? “The son of man”, said Jesus, “came to seek and to save the lost”. “With the drawing of this Love and the voice of this Calling” [T.S. Eliot] Grace upon Grace.

Reflection on Ephesians 1: 3-14

The writer to the church in Ephesus takes up the story of God's grace, of the “*love that cares and stoops and rescues*” freely offered to those who would recognise their need and accept it. Love to the loveless shown that they might lovely be. “*To those who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become*

children of God”, wrote John, and our reading from Ephesians takes up the theme. They might not be the children of Israel but they could and had been “chosen” by “adoption”.

Adoption, not just of children but of adults, was well known in Roman law and society. A man with no son to succeed to his rank and properties could adopt anyone he chose, and this person would take his name and become, in legal and practical fact, his son. In the same way these Ephesians who accepted Jesus’s words, and had faith in the power of his death and resurrection, had become the children of God’s grace, “*born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God*”, or, as Jesus said to Nicodemus “*born of the spirit*”.

This was entirely within the spirit of the scriptures, and understood by the writer to the Ephesians to be part the “*mystery*” of God’s will, “*according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.*”

There were the words of God in Genesis, the promise to Abraham that “*through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me.*”

Later, to the prophet Isaiah he had said, “*It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth.*” [49:6] Then, when the Samaritan woman at the well challenged Jesus as to why the Jews claimed that Jerusalem, and only Jerusalem, was the place where God was to be worshipped, he replied that the time would come when no one would worship only in this or that “holy” place.

Rather, by God’s grace, “*true worshippers*” would worship, would know the presence of “*the Father in spirit and truth*”, anywhere, any time, “*to the praise,*” as it says in Ephesians, “*of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved.*”

And this is where we stand – or sit - whether in a house or church or in the street or the garden, wherever we meet God or our neighbours. This, in Paul’s words to the Romans, is “*the grace in which we stand*”, and in which “*we rejoice in hope of the glory of God.*”

Grace, glory, hope and rejoicing. Apparently in its original Greek the passage we heard from Ephesians is all one long sentence, as though the writer was trying to pack everything into one great burst of joy and praise – “*Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places . . . ‘ to the praise of his glory’.* Amen and Amen.

And yet that is not all. We have to go further, for as Paul writes in the Second Epistle to the Corinthians: “*All this is from God, . . . that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people’s sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation*” The message of reconciliation is what it’s all about, and whatever we may think about the state of the world as we have made it, however hopeless we may feel at times, God is still at work, seeking, calling, drawing people into reconciliation with Himself and with each other.

So we, too, are called to this ministry; to live out our faith in the ways He has commanded. We also are called to care for the poor and oppressed and to shine with His light in the world; to look, to listen for and to hear the voices of those who are lost; who are seeking, restless, feeling their need for meaning, or for a purpose that is only, ultimately, to be found in the grace of God. In the power of the Spirit we, too, are called to spread God’s love and grace and generosity. How much more sense that makes of life and of living in the world. How much more meaning and purpose it gives. How fully we can live, knowing we have a place in His plan, and to live for the praise of his glory. Thanks be to God. Amen.