



Sermon preached by Revd Nigel Uden on 7th July 2024

Readings: *II Corinthians 12.2-10; Mark 6.1-13*

Trinity V1

The Sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion

May these spoken words about so many written words, be by the Holy Spirit, a living word for us about the Word made flesh, Jesus Christ.

The Bible contains lots of letters. Some are to churches, like second Corinthians from which Maureen read, and some are to groups of churches, like the letters of St Peter. They inspire, advise, admonish, and spur on their readers. Some of the letters, though, are to individuals. Think of Paul writing two millennia ago to his younger colleagues, Timothy and Titus, with personal and wise words about how to be a follower of Jesus in their day and context.

So, there is a precedent for some Christian people to write letters to other Christian people at particular moments in their lives. On this day when Charlotte and Elizabeth are to be baptised, and, with Kurt, to become members of the Church, this sermon takes the form of a letter to them from the members of Downing Place Church.

Elizabeth, Charlotte and Kurt, this comes to you from all of us who are Downing Place United Reformed Church, with a message of welcome and goodwill. We pray that you feel confident both of God's love for you, and of ours.

We are happy and grateful when we think of you. Happy and grateful, Charlotte and Elizabeth, that today marks a significant staging post on your life journey since the thanksgiving for your birth in 2009, when your family and the members of Emmanuel Church committed to sharing with you the good news of Jesus Christ, in what they said and did, until this day when you sign up to that adventure of discovery in your own right. Happy and grateful, too, Kurt, that today enables us to embrace you, as you bring to our fellowship decades of Christian faith and life, and experience of Eldership and of the world.

We have found that when we immerse ourselves in the life of the Church it is easy to get stuck into lots of tasks and responsibilities. Ask the Church Secretary. That is not wrong. But we have come to understand that it is not the primary thing about being a Christian; our devout busyness is not the starting point. No, we've realised that St Paul was onto something when he wrote about the grace that God shows us in the living, dying and rising of Jesus, and urged us to enjoy it. You see, God's grace does not treat us in the way we deserve to be treated, but rather in the way God delights to treat us. What's not to enjoy! Of course, we are not perfect. We have flaws and failings, and we make mistakes. They can seem like evidence of our weakness, even of our worthlessness. Yet God treats us with grace that is less about ignoring the mistakes, and more about loving us through them so that we can grow because of them into wiser, stronger people, and into more authentic followers of Jesus. When we are shaped by God's grace, although those mistakes are part of us, they do not define us. How we treasure St Paul telling us that he hears Jesus say, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.' Yes, in life the stuff that can be tricky to wade through is precisely the stuff that strengthens us.

We have also come to terms with how taking Jesus seriously can set us on the edge of society. Fewer people now have a religious faith. It seems that there is lots of self-confidence that human beings are complete in themselves. They don't need any sense of the One who made us, not any regard for the One who reveals God to us. In Western Europe, respect for God and for God's Son is waning. It's not so much that they take offence at him as that

they just ignore him. 'Our common sense is sufficient for us', as it were. So, being a follower of Jesus today is not easy, and can put us out on a limb. That's why we need each other, so that when it is hard for us there are others who have our back, offer us encouragement, or pray for us when our own praying has dried up.

This sense of Christians needing each other is perhaps most obvious when, like those earliest disciples, we feel compelled to answer God's love for us with our love for God; in other words, moved to try and achieve something for God in God's world. We can rarely do that on our own. It might be to work for reconciliation amongst those who are at odds with one another. It might be to work for the preservation of planet A, because there is no planet B. It might be to help others find in the Trinity their maker, their lover, and their keeper. In signing up for some or all of that, we will have times of real fulfilment - serving God's mission is deeply satisfying, particularly when we find the words that enable others to get a persuasive sense of the hope that we have. At other times, though, walking the way of God will be harder. People might ignore us, jeer at us, even attack us. Experience has taught us that giving up doesn't often make anything much better. It might be tempting to walk away from the trouble, but Jesus' example on the Cross prods us not to give up on the task of making his love real wherever we are and whatever we are doing. We try not to forget that he said, 'My grace is sufficient ...'. And on that first Easter Day, when Jesus left the tomb empty, it was an illustration like no other before or since that against the greatest odds, love still wins. We can't know quite where that all takes us, but putting faith in God, we trust that God will keep at it and bring everything to a flourishing finish when Christ Jesus appears.¹ As another letter has it, 'This Jesus is both True God and Real Life. Dear children, be on guard against all clever facsimiles.'²

Charlotte, Elizabeth, and Kurt, remember wherever you go, that you are part of this family, Downing Place Church. Just as we would be thrilled if you thought of us in your prayers, please know what we will think of you in ours.

Peace to you, as 'Christ alone is your Cornerstone'.³

Nigel Philip,

speaking for all who are Downing Place Church

N. P. Uden
7th July 2024

¹ cf Philippians 1.6

² I John 5.21 as in *The Message*

³ Referencing the worship song, *Cornerstone*, by Reuben Morgan, of Hillsong.