

The Cross as a Symbol of **God's Grace**

The grace of God is experienced and enjoyed only when humility is the fruit of brokenness

Lent is an interesting time. A lot of people, have a lot to say on a subject about which they *seem* to know very little! I came across a web page titled, "*6 Reasons to Observe Lent (Even if You're Not Catholic)*"¹, which says:

- it will help you be a better person
- grief is good (!)
- repentance means saying *I'm sorry*
- fasting makes you awesome.
- it's also about forgiveness, and we all need to forgive someone.
- sacrifice is good for the soul.

Like Megan's blog last week in which she suggested Lent was about challenging your vices, churches across all denominations, often mistakenly guide us into the false belief, Lent is about doing things to become a better person.

Over the past three weeks we have repeatedly said, Lent is a time to journey to the Cross on which Jesus died. We have explored the cross as a symbol of our sin, and last Sunday as a symbol of God's Covenant. Today we shall explore the cross as a symbol of God's Grace.

Chapter 11 of the letter to the Hebrews, known as the *Faith Hall of Fame*, the author lists people, who despite the trials they suffered and difficulties they lived through, were commended for their faith².

¹ <http://www.beliefnet.com/faiths/religious-observances/lent/6-reasons-to-observe-lent-even-if-youre-not-catholic.aspx> (on 7th March, 2017)

² Hebrews 11

About them the author says, *for those who have been trained and mastered the discipline of not considering difficulties and problems in life as punishment, viewing it instead, as training and the practice of discipline, their lives produces its peaceful fruit, which is righteousness*³.

The writer then urges, "*See to it that **no one misses the grace of God***"⁴.

The only practical illustration I can think of is, "*potty training*"! This is as difficult for the child as it is for the parent. The child, however, should not **feel** punished for his lack of control, instead should be lovingly encouraged to practice the discipline of self-control. Undoubtedly, when the child masters the discipline of self control, the parents feel their efforts were worthwhile, and the child feels, life is worth living - a peaceful fruit!

On the face of it, God's grace doesn't make sense. Perhaps because we have distorted its meaning, despite the many books written on the subject, God's grace is still as difficult to explain now as it has ever been.

The perversion of the word *grace* itself does not help. In England, until time of Henry VIII, and in Scotland until the Act of Union of 1707, Kings and Queens were addressed as "Your Grace". Today, non-royals (Dukes and Duchesses) and archbishops receive this salutation.

We also use phrases like, *falling from grace*, which conveys the exact opposite meaning of God's **grace**!

If I was to tell you, grace is bigger than all our mistakes put together, all our failures, all our desire for revenge and our seemingly impossible situations, that no sin is so great, no bitterness so deep that God's grace cannot **transform your heart and rewrite your life story**, you would still be wondering, *So what then **IS** Grace?*

³ Hebrews 12:11

⁴ Hebrews 12:15

The only way to understand *grace*, is to experience it, first hand.

To start with, we cannot experience *grace* by trying to draw ourselves closer to God, nor by currying favour with Him by doing things He supposedly wants us to do. *GRACE* is the act of **God drawing near to us**, giving us His full, complete and undivided attention, when we know we do not deserve His consideration.

As we journey towards the cross, as it comes into clearer focus and looms larger before us, we stand amazed, *how much closer can God get?* To place Himself in the midst of human suffering, to subject Himself to the worst form of torture, is as close as God can ever get to human existence.

From the cradle to the cross, God journeys deep into the human condition. He suffers taunts and insults and the worst that the sinful human heart can dish out. He suffers the worst physical pain ever inflicted by one human on another; He suffers the angst of desertion by friends and followers, **and** He suffers the apathy of those who stood by, said nothing, did nothing.

At the height of physical pain, as His human body begins to give way, Jesus cries out, *My Father, why have you deserted me?*⁵, the exact same words David cries out in his pain when God **seems** so distant, *My God, my God, why have you abandoned me? Why are you so far away when I groan for help?*⁶

It is at such times, when we **feel** distant from God, when we **feel** we are abandoned by God, that **He** draws close to us, to assure us, to comfort us and give us His strength and His wisdom, to endure the hardship and the difficulty.

⁵ Mark 15:34; Matthew 27:46

⁶ Psalm 22:1

God's grace can only be **experienced**, however, by making ourselves humble before Him. Jesus approached the cross with the attitude, *Not my will but Yours, My Father*, and so must we. There are those who wait until life has led them to the precipice, teetering on the edge, at which point they realise, their strength, their knowledge, their wisdom has let them down; there are also those who, **before** they reach the precipice, humble themselves before God and allow Him to be their guide.

As we approach the cross, stripped of human strength and wisdom we realise, God loves us as we are, **but** God loves us too much to leave us, as we are! This is *grace!*

The cross reminds us that, by our own strength, our own wisdom and with our own resources, we cannot deal with the problem of pain, overcome disease and poverty, nor address the problem of evil in the world.

God comes to us at the cross and invites us to meet Him at the empty cross, to see for ourselves and appreciate how **He** dealt with the problem of sin, which surrounds, oppresses and torments the human race. At the empty cross, we learn to treasure God's act of saving grace for each one of us. He loves each of us so much, He is reluctant and refuses to leave us as we are. This is *grace!*

The author Philip Yancey says, *"Here at the cross is the man who loves his enemies, the man whose righteousness is greater than that of the Pharisees, who being rich became poor, who gives his overcoat to those who take his undergarment, who prays for those who deceitfully use him. The cross is not a detour or a hurdle on the way to (God's) Kingdom, nor is it even the way to (God's) Kingdom; it **IS** (God's) Kingdom come."*⁷

How then do we experience God's *grace*?

⁷ Philip Yancey, *The Jesus I Never Knew*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 196.

Surrendering our dependance on our will, our pride, self achievement, and wisdom is the starting point of humility. God meets us when we make the conscious decision to let Him take control of our lives.

Many of us might find this difficult. We might have been in a relationship in the past in which we allowed the other person to take control of our lives together, and this trust was misused.

Making a conscious decision to allow God to take control of our lives is very different to placing our trust in another person. We have said over the past several months, we enter into a relationship with God based on His character, a person who can be trusted to honour His Word, and delivers on His every promise.

We often make the mistake of thinking, **regret** (feeling sorry for ourselves) is all it takes to be humble before God. Regret is an optical illusion: a lot of momentum but no motion. Regret is the road to nowhere; it leaves us spinning our wheels in the rut of self-pity.

Confession, the admission of guilt, is the starting point of humbling ourselves. We must, however, make our confession before God; confessing before another person **can** lead to our trust being misplaced.

Repentance, however, the admission of guilt *followed by* a commitment not to repeat the wrong, opens the door to God's forgiveness. This is *grace!*

Through God's forgiveness, we experience His grace. He gives us strength when we are weak, lifts us up when we are unable, carries us when our legs are weak and we cannot walk, loves us when we cannot love. Whatever it is we cannot do, God loves us too much, to leave us as we are, struggling with our inability and our weaknesses.

Let me close with the life example of the apostle Paul. We know he persecuted Christians and was present at the stoning-to-death of the

apostle Stephen. We know how, on the road to Damascus, Jesus the Christ came to him in person and his life changed as a result of this meeting.

This is what Paul says about his life: *read 2 Corinthians 12:1-10*

The cross on which Jesus was hung to die, reveals yet another surprise: God's grace empowers you and makes it possible for you, to do what God wants you to do in His Kingdom, here and now. He knows your abilities, your weaknesses and your strengths, and is waiting for you to experience His grace.

So, don't leave here thinking you are not adequate for the work God has set for you. His grace is sufficient for you. His grace is all you need!

God loves you as you are, but He loves you too much to leave you, as you are!

AMEN.