

EPHESIANS 2:1-10
THE INCOMPARABLE RICHES OF GRACE

I was conducting a wedding: we had the usual people around about the front of the church: the bride, groom, bridesmaids, best man and a flower girl. I had gone through the service as usual and come out other side and married the right person to the right person, which is always success at a wedding! Afterwards at the reception, one of the guests, who had been close to the front of the Church, came up to me and said 'did you notice the flower girl?' and I had known that she was there, but she had taken no active part in the service, so I'd not paid her too much attention. This person said 'she looked up at you every time you mentioned her name!' I was puzzled by this because I hadn't been speaking to her at all. So I asked 'what do you mean? When did I mention her name?' 'All way through the service!' came the reply. 'What is her name?' 'Grace!'

Grace is one of these Church-words that we use so often, without always really understanding what it is all about. Grace is a girl's name; grace is the name we give to the prayer we say before meals; grace is the heart of the gospel. Grace is the heart of Ephesians 2:1-10 where Paul describes the reason why God sent Jesus to be our Saviour, what was God's motive. A definition: 'Grace is God's love to people who don't deserve it.' (James Philip) or a slightly fuller one from James Denney: "Grace is the love of God, spontaneous, beautiful, unearned, at work in Jesus Christ for the salvation of sinful people." Or a clever way of remembering grace: God's Riches At Christ's Expense. The whole notion of grace is that God loves us when we are not lovable; that He blesses us even when we don't deserve blessing.

We work with a different way of thinking. We work with a way of thinking that is based on 'we get what we deserve'. Our whole legal system is based on people getting what they deserve, the punishment fits the crime and we complain when we think that it doesn't, either because people get off too lightly, or are punished unjustly. Darren Fletcher didn't deserve a red card on Tuesday night and so there was a great furore in the sports papers on Wednesday, and so they say how unjust that he miss the cup final. 'We get what we deserve' is so much at the heart of way we think about life. We then import that into our understanding of the way God in which works: 'we get what we deserve from God' and so we think that because we deserve so little blessing from God, we get little; or even worse and more catastrophic, we see bad things happen and the first question we ask is 'what have I done to deserve this? God is punishing me for my wrongdoing!' But that is not Bible thinking, my friends; that has not come from the New Testament; that has come from the way the world thinks, from our fears and superstitions, and not from the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ!

Ephesians 2:1-10 is a key passage for us to understand God, our salvation and ourselves. Paul paints a huge contrast in huge brush strokes. This is not a painting in fine detail and an intricate description of every person; this is a huge canvas in which brushstrokes are huge and bold and powerful, but a painting in which we can find ourselves depicted. Here are some big contrasts: dead and alive – you can't get any bigger contrast than that! Good and evil – the two sides of human nature are here, the dark side of humanity and what we are like when God is at work in us. Wrath and salvation – the two outcomes of that humanity. I'd love to take time to go into this in every detail, but we don't have time to do that, but instead see the big, bold brush strokes and at the end, appreciate God who is rich in grace and who has lavished His love upon us in Jesus. That's what Paul wants us to see and to rejoice in God who is gracious!

Human nature has a dark side. I take it that you wouldn't argue with that, in a week when eight men have been sentenced in the High Court for unspeakable crimes against young children. Human nature is capable of great good deeds, but is also capable of the most shameful things; we don't all do the worst, but unchecked, we are capable of dark deeds. Paul uses some strong language: "*As for you* (this is not a philosophical treatise on human nature, this is personal; this is what we are like!)" (vv1-3) You might recoil from that kind of language, but let me ask you: have you ever made a mistake? Have you ever done something wrong, that you now regret? Have you ever hurt someone by something you said or did? If you answer 'yes' to even one of these questions, then this is a description of you and the dark side of our human nature! It is certainly a description of me! We try to design programmes to sort our world, to create utopia in the world, new communities where everything will be peace and light; we long to create a just, free and humane society, but can't ever do that on our own, because there is one problem we can't solve – our human nature is askew.

There are two reactions in God to this way of human living and behaving. The first is wrath. Now we need to be clear about what this means; this does not mean that God is bad-tempered or spiteful; this is not about God being malicious towards us or out for revenge. God's wrath is His consistent reaction to evil; He can't stand evil because He is God who loves what is right and good; His wrath is His refusal to compromise with evil in world. Think about your reaction to the story of these eight men and if you felt outrage or anger, then magnify that a thousand times to see the reaction of God. If things had stayed as they were, then this would have been God's only reaction to our sinful human nature and we would have been people who could only despair. There would be no hope, no salvation! This is what we deserve!

But there is a second reaction: so often in the Bible, little words are key. "*But God...*" (v.4f) There is another reaction in God to the dark side of our human nature and that is to save us from it and from its consequences. We used to live in Caithness, are there are lots of little crofts scattered about the Caithness' moorland; but you could only appreciate how many there were at night, because at night you could see the lights of these houses for miles around. When it was dark; the darkness made the light stand out! We see the grace and love of God in the gospel far more clearly against the black background of our human nature.

'Made alive', 'raised' 'seated' – these were three key events in life of Jesus: at Easter He came alive; then we read about His ascension, being raised back to heaven and glory; now He is seated at God's right hand, a place of honour and glory; these were three great events in Jesus' life. Paul uses these three phrases in these verses, but he is not talking about Jesus; he is talking about us! We are made alive, we are raised up with Christ; we are seated with Him in heaven to share in His glory. Salvation is a word that brings together all that God has done for us: there is forgiveness for our sins; we are no longer objects of wrath, but we are receivers of God's great, limitless blessing; God is at work in us to make us new people. This not about some gentle enrichment of life, by adding something slightly different to what we now have; this is about a whole new life; God has saved us in Christ. Jesus has taken the Father's wrath and faced it in our place; Christ has taken our sin and faced death in our place and for us; the cross is place where this great change began and now the blessing of God is for us.

Why should God do this? Here comes 'grace!' "*God raised...*" (v6f) 'Grace is God's love to people who don't deserve it'; the key word in all of these definitions is 'unearned'! Throw out the notion of 'we get what we deserve' because the gospel is about something very different. The gospel is about God giving to us what we don't

deserve, is about God lavishing His love upon us, knowing what we're like and loving us just same. Grace is about God making us rich when we have done nothing to deserve this wealth. Look at Zaccheus: we would describe Zaccheus as a thief, a greedy man, a man who exploited others and abused his position of trust; so he was unloved, an outcast; he was a man who had made mistakes for his own ends, a selfish, self-centred man; he was the kind of man whom the religious people of Jericho would tell Jesus to avoid; 'he doesn't deserve to have you go to his house.' But it is to Zaccheus that Jesus goes; He even goes to his house for tea; knowing what Zaccheus is like, Jesus goes to save him. We might not be like Zaccheus in every detail, but this is grace; Jesus' love to people who don't deserve, who are not worthy, who have made mistakes, who have faults and shortcomings, who don't tick every box perfectly; this is Jesus' love to us.

There are three results:

First of all, we see ourselves in a new way: John Bradford, a sixteenth-century Christian, was watching a criminal being taken to the gallows to be hanged; famously said "there, but for the grace of God, goes John Bradford" – he saw that he shared in this dark side of human nature; we can be good, but we can sometimes be anything but, and if we think we don't share dark side, we need to see ourselves more clearly. But the second thing grace challenges us to see is very different: we are loved people; we are forgiven people; we are people who share in Jesus' glory; we are people whom God loves dearly and deeply; if we only see our faults and failings and weaknesses, then part of the picture is missing; if think 'we only get what we deserve and I don't deserve anything' then we need to think differently because we miss out on seeing something profound about ourselves: we are a people loved, accepted, forgiven, saved, greatly blessed by God.

Secondly there is something here too about the way in which we treat one another: do we treat other people only as they deserve? Or are we gracious to others in our attitudes? There is no time to take that further, though we will see something of that next week.

Thirdly, we see what God is like. God has lavished His love upon us; 'lavished' is a big word. God has shown "*the...*" (v7) God knows what we are like and loves us; God knows what the world is like, He knows the influences on us from the world around us, peer pressure, the drive to succeed; He also knows the forces at work on us inside, the dark side of human nature, our faults and mistakes, the blind alleys into which this dark side leads us. And He loves us; His grace is lavished upon us; we deserve wrath, we are given love; we deserve death, we are given life; we deserve nothing, we are given everything. This is the God of the gospel; this is what God is really like.

Our response: faith! Faith is not about us telling God how good we are and telling Him how many good things we deserve. Faith is about us coming with empty hands to God looking for Him to fill these hands with blessing. Faith recognises grace. I'd like to think that might leave church today rejoicing in God's grace; that you might see something you've not seen before and it makes your heart sing. Jesus' grace transformed Zaccheus' life; the same grace makes us alive, raises us with Christ and seats us to share in the glory of God.