

JOHN 7:53-8:11  
FULL OF GRACE AND TRUTH

"I am..." How would you finish that sentence? If you were being asked to describe your personality what words would finish that sentence? How would you describe yourself? Sometimes it is hard to do that in a realistic way; it can take other people to answer that for us at times, either because we are too shy to give ourselves compliments, or because we have a much too rosy picture of ourselves and are blind to all of our faults.

Perhaps you've taken one of these Myers-Briggs personality type tests, so you know whether you're an introvert or extrovert, a thinking or feeling person etc. People are complex creatures; it is often not as simple as 'either... or...'; many people will say that 'it depends on my mood, my circumstances – there are all kinds of things that will go to decide what kind of person I am today' and sometimes we have people who are almost contradictory, that when things were going well they are quite extrovert, sociable and friendly, but when life is hard they become introverted and shy and defensive.

This can have a dark side too because there are people who are one thing outside, but are quite a different character indoors. The story of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde has come into our language: we describe some people as Jekyll and Hyde characters by which we mean that they have two very different sides to their nature and sometimes have friendly, good side, but other people see a much nastier streak to them.

The title of today's sermon 'Full of grace and truth' is about Jesus. The phrase comes from the prologue to John's gospel, when John is not telling the story of Advent or Christmas, but is taking a step back from the story to reflect on what the story means and how big it is. "The Word became flesh and blood and moved into the neighbourhood" (John 1:14) We've already said that when Jesus came God moved into our neighbourhood and came to live in our world; last week, we spoke about Jesus as the perfect man, who has come to be the Saviour for us, who has come to be a pioneer going before us into heaven and who has come to be an example of how to live. Today we consider some of the qualities of this perfect man, the qualities with which Jesus came when He came into the world. John gives us two: "we have..." (John 1:14) There is more to Jesus than this; He has lots of other qualities as well, but in some ways these two qualities sum up His personality; in some ways 'full of grace and truth' says it all. This is what Jesus is like.

We begin with a story. The story took place in Jerusalem when Jesus was there for one of the great Jewish feasts. It tells of an event that seemed to have been planned beforehand to try to catch Jesus out. He is sitting in the temple yard, teaching people something when the teachers of the law and the Pharisees dragged a woman into the circle. She had been caught in the act of adultery and they brought her into the circle to see what Jesus would make of her. "Teacher..." (8:4f) Now what would Jesus say? Would He order her to be stoned in which case He was simply upholding law and being like any other teacher? Or would He order her release in which case He would be accused of breaking the law and condoning sin. "But Jesus..." (8:6b) and when they pressed Him He said "If any..." (8:7) The teachers and Pharisees began to realise that Jesus had challenged them about their own life and they began to drift away from the circle because knew that none of them was faultless. The story ended with Jesus saying to the woman: "Woman, where..." (8:10f)

By looking at what Jesus did in this story we see something of His character; what kind of person is Jesus? First of all, He does not condemn the woman, but treats her

gently and tenderly. "Woman..." (8:10f) We know nothing about this woman and what kind of person she really was; we know nothing more of the circumstances of the story; where, for example, is the man with whom she commits adultery? He makes no appearance, but there must have been a man. Jesus treats her with grace. Grace is love to people who don't deserve it. That's what Jesus shows to the woman in this story; she has made a mistake; she has been caught in the act, but Jesus deals with her graciously, lovingly.

But, there is another side to Jesus in this story and we see it twice. The first time we see the quality we call 'truth' is in Jesus' words to the crowd of legal eagles and Pharisees: "If any..." (8:7) 'Yes, the law does say that this woman should be stoned, and whichever of you is without sin can throw the first stone'; people are confronted with the truth, the truth about themselves, that they were not perfect either; they have been brought face to face with an aspect of the truth that they had perhaps never thought about before. The second time we see truth is in Jesus' last words: "Go now..." (8:11) The woman is challenged to be a different person, to leave her old life behind and to be changed, to live a good life, a better life, a new life of upright living. He does not condemn her, but neither does He condone what she has done; it is wrong and she should leave it and live in a different way, an upright, good, honest way.

Jesus comes full of grace and truth. Here is one story which shows us both of these qualities in action. Both of these words are at the heart of Jesus' character, both are about our relationship with God, and both have spin-off consequences for the kind of Church we are, the kind of people we are. First of all, what is grace? I was once conducting a wedding and there was a flower-girl who kept looking up at me, every time I spoke her name in the wedding service – her name? Grace! "Grace is the love of God, spontaneous, beautiful, unearned at work in Jesus." (James Denney) The key to it is that word 'unearned' – God gives us what we don't deserve. How well have we loved God? How perfectly have we kept his laws? How diligently have we followed Jesus? How strong has our faith been? When we ask these questions, we see that we have not been people we should have been; we have not always been very lovable people, if we're honest. Yet, God has loved us and has kept loving us. The woman in our story deserved condemnation, but Jesus didn't give her what she deserved. The gospel is about God giving us what we don't deserve – forgiveness, peace, hope, love. That is grace and that is at heart of Jesus.

'Truth' on other hand, can have two meanings. It can mean 'truth' as in something to tell, 'the truth'. So Jesus came to tell us what is and was true; He came to reveal to us things about God, our world, ourselves, that we did not know. He came, not to tell nice stories that we can turn into fairy tales, but He came to tell us 'the truth' about God and us and the world and how to be saved. He told the woman truth, that sin was bad for her. 'Truth' can also mean being honest, trustworthy, faithful and dependable and Jesus was that also; He was someone whom people recognised as completely reliable, would not let them down, but was as good as His word. He came teaching, revealing truth and He came to be honest, a man of integrity.

We need both grace and truth in our relationship with God. Grace shows us that God loves us when we don't deserve it, but the danger of grace on its own is that it can seem floppy, it can seem to condone all kinds of sins and faults and mistakes; it can seem as if it doesn't matter how we live because God will love us anyway. So we need to balance grace with truth because truth is about standards and values, about knowing what God wants of us, what kind of people He wants us to be, that there are ways to behave that are good and right and that there are sins that are bad for us and that we should leave well alone. The danger of truth on its own is that it appears

cold and hard, 'this is the law and you should obey it, come what may', with the other side of that coin being a God who condemns us for every crime and misdemeanour. So we need both grace and truth: grace shows us God's love even when we don't deserve it; and truth that shows us how to live and behave. Both go together. Grace gives truth a warm human face; truth gives grace a backbone. So God loves us when we don't deserve His love and He teaches us truth that we should know and believe and by which we should live.

What kind of Church are we? We should be a Church that has grace and truth at very heart of Church life. Some Churches have a name for rules and regulations, this is how it is and this is how it will always be and seems to have a quite cold, hard face; on the other hand, we also know Churches which more or less give the impression that 'anything goes' and that everything is acceptable, regardless. Now, a Church shaped by grace and truth will shy away from both of these extremes. Grace challenges us to accept each other as we are and love people, even when they are not very lovable people. Truth challenges us to hold onto set of standards and values that Jesus teaches and not to let these standards and values go, a Church that knows, believes, and lives by the truth that the bible teaches. What kind of people are we? The same thing applies! We are people who have been loved by God when we do not deserve it, so we should love others in same way; we should be people who know, believe in, and live by the truth God has given us in Jesus and in the bible.

Isaiah painted a picture of the servant of the Lord who would come into the world one day; this is a picture we believe Jesus fulfilled. Here is what the servant is like: "He will..." (Is 42:2f) There are weak and vulnerable people out there; He will treat them with love and compassion; He will not break them by condemning them, but will restore them in grace. "In faithfulness..." (Is 42:3f) He will also stand up and be counted for the big issues of justice and upright living, a man of truth and integrity. Little wonder these words are seen to be fulfilled when Jesus came. This is exactly what He was like.

Do we feel like the bruised reed? Like the smouldering wick? Are we weak and vulnerable and about to give up. Jesus is full of grace to love us when we don't deserve it and to keep loving us. Do we want someone to stand up for goodness and right living and truth in our fallen world? Jesus is full of truth, to teach us what is right, to be honest and upright. That is the kind of man Jesus was and is, full of grace and truth – His grace and truth are vital for our relationship with God; grace and truth should shape the kind of Church we are, the kind of people we are. This is how Jesus came, this is what He was like when He came; 'full of grace and truth.'