

ROMANS 4:16-25
GRACE-SHAPED CHRISTIANS

Grace is such a brilliant word! It is a girl's name, but that's not what makes it brilliant; I had an aunt called Grace, but that's not why I like it! It is at the heart of the gospel! We cannot talk about being a Christian without 'grace' being part of the conversation. We cannot say important things about the church without 'grace' being part of the conversation. It is a word and idea that shapes our whole view of God and of ourselves and should (but so often doesn't) shape our view of other people. The Bible is full of grace; the communion service is all about grace. It gets everywhere and from our point of view, it's just as well that it does.

Our DNA makes us the people we are; our DNA shapes our personalities, the way we look, everything about us is the product of our DNA. What is the DNA of the Christian faith or the Church? What shapes the essence of Christianity? Two weeks ago, we said that "Jesus is Lord" shapes the Church, that basic confession of faith; we said then that it is important for us to rediscover the place and importance of Jesus. A second strand of that DNA is grace: grace is about the way in which God deals with us and the promises He makes to us. There are all kinds of definitions of grace, but the simplest that I've come across is "God's love to people who are not worthy of it." (Jas Philip) God loves us, blesses us, treats us well, simply because there is grace in His heart.

Look at Abraham: in Romans 4, Paul uses Abraham as an example of a man whom God blesses by His grace and through faith. "*The promise...*" (4:16) God promises Abraham the world; "He should be heir of the whole world!" He goes on from there to talk about Abraham as the one whom God had chosen to receive these promises and blessings and how Abraham believed these promises: "*Being fully...*" (v21) God made promises, Abraham believed them and lived his life with that faith in his heart; the promises were centred on his son Isaac and God kept these promises and completed them in coming of Jesus. Why Abraham? He wasn't a particularly bad man, but he wasn't perfect either; he had his faults and failings, as you'll discover if you read his story; he couldn't really be said to deserve God's blessing as it was promised; so the source of these promises and this great blessing? The grace of God! God's love to someone who does not deserve it! Grace-promise-faith is gospel thread by which God works in our hearts.

But there's another kind of thread by which we think God works. Let's call it 'law-mistake-guilt' and it has such a strong grip on the human psyche. Here's how it works: "God tells us what to do; we get it wrong; God punishes us". So often that is the way we think and it's totally different; we've persuaded ourselves that we need to deserve God's favour and so we have to work hard, but just as we get near, we make yet another mistake and fall away from God again and God is angry with us all over again and makes us pay! So we see ourselves driven away from God time and time again, or at least kept at arms length, getting what we really deserve, when all of the time God wants to bring us near, to love us and to bless us.

"*These words...*" (4:23f) God has not just promised us the world, but heaven as well; we are not particularly bad people, but we're not perfect people, we make mistakes, we get things wrong. So the promise is not based on what we deserve, but on the God who loves us despite our faults, failings and sins. The gospel is about God who loves us as we are and who makes promises to us, to forgive, to bless, to be with us and these promises find their focus in death and resurrection of Jesus. It is because of Jesus that

we are forgiven; it is because of Jesus that we are the friends and family of God, at one with Him, and have the promised hope of heaven. This is grace: God loves us as we are and blesses us and promises us and we believe these promises.

Grace then should shape the way that we think about God, ourselves and other people: **A Grace-shaped attitude to God** centres on the qualities of gratitude and trust. The gospel is about what God has done for us; all that is left for us to do is open our hands to receive what God would give us. How hard do you find it to receive presents, especially when it is unexpected and spontaneous? “Oh, no. I couldn’t take that!” We run the risk of seeming to be ungrateful when we’re reluctant to receive a present? Translate that into our relationship with God and that’s our grace-shaped relationship to God. Jesus has done it all for us; for us, we are left to say thank you and receive by faith the promises and blessings of God for us. We no longer need to prove ourselves to God; we no longer need to work to earn God’s blessing or to earn His approval or favour. We already have His favour in Jesus; we already have everything ever need; let us be glad and believe!

A Grace-shaped attitude to ourselves focuses on the qualities of humility and contentment. We are the people we are because of grace. We no longer need to prove ourselves to God, nor prove ourselves to ourselves. Someone suggested recently that instead of the New Years Honour Christians had another honour: SSBG – “Sinners saved by grace”. Sometimes we only get as far as the ‘sinners’ bit and no further; we come down hard on ourselves because we’re all too aware of our faults and failings and we know all that we don’t deserve. But we can find peace and contentment; we can see ourselves as God sees us, through the eyes of grace; we are accepted children, and we rest content in His grace and favour which we already have in Christ.

A Grace-shaped attitude to other people focuses on the qualities of acceptance and love. This seems to be the hardest of all, to treat other people with grace. We can be bitter critics of other people and their mistakes; we can condemn others for the least little thing they do wrong; we expect people to be perfect in every way! But grace doesn’t treat us like that; so grace in us should treat other people with acceptance, forgiveness, understanding, compassion, warmth! God is less exacting on us than we are on one another – how’s that for a paradox! Be accepting of each other, forgiving of one another’s mistakes, compassionate for our needs.

Grace is at the heart of the communion service. The communion service is all about Jesus and what He has done; He has loved us and has laid down His life for us; He has sacrificed Himself for us to be our Saviour and the saviour for the whole world. The bread and wine remind us of that love and Jesus’ sacrifice in a way that we can touch, feel, taste and share. Grace is a huge part of the DNA of the Christian and of the Church; it makes us who we are, it makes the Church what we are, it creates faith! Paul talks of Jesus who “*was delivered...*” (Rom 4:25) Grace inspired God to give His Son; grace inspired the Son to give His life; it is grace that makes these promises and blessings ours. Be glad and believe!