

GRACE IN WEAKNESS

Nic Denny-Dimitriou - 10th July 2005

Romans 8: 9-17

My focus this Sunday is our struggle with sin and human frailty – and being open to God’s love and grace to transform us. Part of the sermon consists of an article I will read.

Over the past 3 weeks we have had similar readings from the letter of St Paul to the Christians in Rome. Two weeks ago, Calvin Cook (7am) and George Niven (9am) spoke to them, and last week I covered in some detail the teaching of Paul in our reading from Romans chapter 7. This Sunday I will touch on his words more lightly, using also an article from Richard Holloway, a former Bishop of Edinburgh (the original article has been slightly edited for brevity, and was entitled “Grace comes to us through weakness” – no further reference available).

There are many paradoxes and apparent contradictions in life and in our faith; one of them is the claim made in scripture that “it is through our sin that we are saved”, and another is the claim that “God’s grace comes to us in our weakness”.

I’d like to expand on these points as much as time allows, but begin by saying that we need to be aware of images of God which WE have made, perhaps received or passed on to us, which are on the extremes and not necessarily the God portrayed in the Scriptures or through the person of Jesus.

One of them is an approach to God in the style of “gentle Jesus, meek and mild”, the Christmas baby never quite grown up, a wimpish Jesus-character to whom our sin doesn’t really matter in an age when the concept of sin is regarded by some as outdated.

Another is a portrayal of God as (almost) “unloving, certainly very tough – and because he is uncompromising especially about our behaviour and about sin, he is just waiting to catch us out and punish us every time we do something wrong!

Extreme though they may be, many respond to God in one or other of these false images. We need to dispense with them, replacing them with more accurate understandings in the light of how God’s character has been revealed to us in the Scriptures and through Jesus – or through the teachings of apostles such as Paul.

In last week’s New Testament reading, we heard St Paul express frustration at his human weaknesses, yet also thankful for Jesus Christ who alone is able to save him from this otherwise messy situation. **Romans 7: 14 >>>>**

In last Sunday’s Gospel we also heard Jesus’ invitation to the weary and burdened to come to him. We heard Jesus stating God’s standards unequivocally, and at the same

time being endlessly loving and compassionate towards us in our sincere but often-failed attempts to be his true disciples.

In this week's reading from Paul's letter to the Christians in Rome, he continues the theme and emphasizes that we have at our disposal the power of the Holy Spirit. We are thus true sons and daughters of God, and can call him intimately in words of "Abba – Father", similar to "daddy", which is what "Abba" means in Jesus' home-language of Aramaic.

Paul also emphasizes that we are heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, i.e. we are entitled to inherit all the treasures of the Kingdom of God. Despite our current sufferings and struggles with frail human nature, we have the assured hope of sharing with God in all the glories of eternal life.

Next Sunday's reading continues his theme, stating that the Holy Spirit helps us in our weakness.

Let me now read extracts from the **article written by Richard Holloway...**

"There was an optician's shop with a fancy window in our town. Behind the display area there was an arrangement of mirrors so that if you passed the shop, you saw yourself coming. It was next to the Picture House, where I had spent many hours as a boy. Going to the pictures twice a week, as we did during the '40s, was a great and pleasurable distraction, but we paid a price for it. The movies bred fantasy, unrealistic identification with the glamorous heroes of the silver screen.

Gregory Peck was my undoing. A friend told my sister that she thought I looked like him, and in the screenplay that I was beginning to make of my life, I became Gregory Peck in "The Keys of the Kingdom", a film about missionaries in China.

This was the part I played until a day, years later, when I was walking down the street past the optician's shop. I had just returned from West Africa, and fancied that the aura of missionary glamour still hung about me: a fading tan, a hint of resoluteness behind the ascetic features, and always, as far as women were concerned, a sense of seductive inapproachability.

The illusion was shattered forever outside the palace of fantasy that created it. In those mirrors outside the optician's, next to the picture house, I saw coming towards me a gangly, stick-like figure, with awkwardly receding hair, who gazed at me through National Health spectacles fixed above a pointed, slightly skew nose.

"What a funny looking man" I thought. Exit Mr. Peck forever!

If Hollywood was the main source of harmless fantasies, it was the church that instilled further illusions. As a boy, I was a compulsive consumer of the lives of the saints, a literary genre that lacked psychological insight or any attempt to discover the humanity

beneath the halo. One was never given any sense of struggle, or any understanding of the raw material from which the saint emerged.

(These lives were often presented without reference to the struggles with sin that these same saints had had – people whose lives were held up for us to emulate in our discipleship of Christ – who, the closer they came to God, the more they realised how dependent they were upon the mercy and grace of God.)

Instead one was presented with a set of comic-book virtues, remote from real human experience. The temptation was to pick a role from “Central Castings for Heaven” and try it out, usually with no reference to one’s own specific humanity.

The problem is that we spend much of our lives watching others, and this leads to the theatricalisation of life, because watchers too, know they are watched. And there are so many parts to play it takes time to discover who one is.

I used to think this was just a modern aberration, but I realise now it has always been a part of human life. Jesus told us 2,000 years ago that there were certain types who did their acts of piety “to be seen by men”. Even then, life was cut into “film clips and sound bytes”.

My fantasy of sanctity and sex appeal was manageable, not too tragic. Reality broke through without too much pain. Most of us fall into the amiable trap of imagining we possess the characteristics we admire in others, and it’s painful to own the truth about ourselves.

It’s altogether more difficult for those whose predicament is that they possess characteristics others abhor, a different thing entirely to NOT possessing characteristics people admire. These are the permanently despised minorities because, unlike most of us, they ARE different. Most people aren’t handsome after all, or holy, so they soon adjust to being neither. It’s altogether different if you are a disfigured person in a society that worships beauty, or a depressive in a society that prizes optimism.

I realise now that in my life, such people have ministered special grace to me, and the grace was not incidental to their condition but intrinsic to it. Those who have meant the most to me have been those with a profound sympathy for the waywardness and self-hatred of the human heart. Alcoholics, in dealing with their addiction, have taught me most about personal honesty and reliance upon grace.

Characteristic of all these people has been a refusal to collude with the conspiracy of success that characterises a moralistic Church. They have rejected the bright and shining lie of human perfectibility and learned to live with only two certainties: their own frailty, and the eternal forgiveness of Christ. Precariously, they live by grace and they minister it to others.

Increasingly, I understand incarnation this way. Incarnation: God, in Jesus, not remaining passive, aloof, a disinterested outsider to human affairs; but in Jesus, fully entering the world of humanity, to redeem it to the original glory in which he created it.

The Word becomes flesh in all its uncertainty and awkwardness. Grace comes to us through weakness. The biblical account of the nativity, purged of its Christmas-box glamour, captures this paradox.

It is by our sin that we are saved, because through it we reach for the grace that alone sustains us. This is why we should have a special regard for the despised, the little ones on the outside, the impure and the untogether. Not because they provide us with an opportunity for ministry, but because they offer us a means of grace. It is through them that God speaks to the church.

“It is by our sin that we are saved, because through it, we reach for the grace alone that sustains us.” Grace requires recognition. The NT letter of Titus reminds us that “the grace of God has dawned upon the world with healing for all.”

Heavenly Father
Your Son, Jesus, revealed the wonder of your saving love.
Renew us by your heavenly grace
And in our weakness, sustain us by your mighty power,
Through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.