

Sermon for 10am Holy Communion St Edmund's Sunday, September 11, 2022

"The grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus." 1 Timothy 1 verse 14

In interviews on radio and television of people who have been caught up in some dramatic, and sometimes traumatic, events, the interviewer often moves from what was experienced (the facts of the situation) to the emotional reaction of the individual to the experience. "Well, what did you feel about it?", they ask. Even, "Has it changed you in any way?"

In his first letter to Timothy, Paul gives us a glimpse into his experience at his conversion from active, enthusiastic, persecution of the church to one of its most profound supporters and advocates. We read about the details that dramatic event in Acts chapter 9.



The great artist, Michelangelo Caravaggio, painted the scene as he saw it. In his painting Paul lies flat on his back alongside his horse which is held by a man who seems completely unaware of what is going on. Paul's arms are outstretched as if he is asking to be lifted up. A bright light shines down upon him.

So what did Paul feel about his conversion experience?

Paul tells Timothy that in that moment he experienced the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ sweeping over him and changing him for ever. It was an overwhelming experience of Grace.

Grace has been defined as love in action.

We speak of the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gospel reading is a great illustration of how the people he encountered experienced it.

We can picture the scene with the tax collectors and sinners coming near to listen to Jesus. Why should they do this? Perhaps it was because they sensed that he had something important to say to them and, most important of all, he seems to know what these outcasts of good society longed for. On being near to Jesus they sensed that what he had to say was of great importance for them. Jesus was concerned about them... it was all about them and not about Jesus and his position.

The religious set, who were very conscious of their role in society, grumbled about Jesus's behaviour of welcoming sinners and actually eating with them. This teacher contaminated himself and endangered his standing in society by mixing with such people.

This prompts Jesus to tell them a parable. The Good Shepherd searches for the lost sheep and having found it carries it home rejoicing with great joy. Here is real love in action. The good Shepherd loves the wanderer who has strayed from home and does not cease his searching until the lost has been found.

There is great rejoicing when the Good Shepherd finds the lost.

Who are the righteous among those clustered around Jesus? No one save Jesus. In truth all are in need of the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, outcasts and religious alike. All need to be found and to be carried home. And their home-coming will trigger heavenly joy; all is laughter and rejoicing.

Listening to the response to the death of our late Queen over radio and television on Thursday and Friday last week, the words grace and dignity kept recurring.

John Milton captures these recollections in Paradise Lost.

“Grace was in all her steps, heav’n in her eye.

In every gesture dignity and love.”

Our late Queen was a great example for us who follow Jesus. It was not just **what** she did, amazing as that was, but **how** she did it. All her attention was focused on the people she was meeting. They felt that they were important to her as she listened to them. Her behaviour was one of loving concern.

We are called to do God’s work in his world gracefully. Grace is God’s gift on offer to us. It is up to us to accept it in faith and allow it to flow from him through us into the lives of others.

This means a life of prayer that we may be given the grace of Jesus with its ingredients of faith and love.

The power of grace is God’s power, working through us as we place our faith in him and express his love for us in our community. The power of grace is seen in the world’s response to the Queen’s death.

And grace comes not just when we are feeling at peace.

Paul Tillich wrote:

“Grace strikes us when we are in great pain and restlessness. It strikes us when we walk through the dark valley of a meaningless and empty life. It strikes us when we feel that our separation is deeper than usual.”

In my experience, God’s grace flows unexpectedly to meet our deepest need. It’s all about our love of God and our love of neighbour - not about ourselves.

My psychologist told me that I needed more joy in my life. I have found that joy when engaging with others, listening and responding with as much grace as I can, putting my trust in Jesus and asking for his help.

Our late Queen’s ability to focus on those she met, to listen and to give, bringing joy to the wider community, is among the many things we thank God for.

May we follow her example as the gracious followers of Jesus. Amen.

John Rice, 11 September 2022