

St Thomas' Church, Lent 2022



Grace, Gifts... and Generosity

Welcome to the first session of our Lent 2022 course.

Over the next 4 sessions we will be stepping a little off the beaten track of traditional Lent study, to do some thinking about God's grace and what that means for us.

You may like to record some of your responses to questions asked through these study sessions and reflect more on these through the weeks between the sessions.

Let's begin!

Traditionally, the period of Lent – the 6 weeks before Easter – is a time when we recognise - again - that we are not the people we should be, and try to do something about that. So we might make an effort to inject a bit more of God into our daily routine: read more scripture, do more listening and talking to God or we may make a real effort to engage in things that we might put under the heading “good works”. All good stuff!

The other strand of a traditional way of keeping Lent, and balancing more scripture, more prayer, more “good works”... is *denial*.

Lent is traditionally the time we give things up. We may stop stockpiling toilet rolls or forego a favourite activity ... or we fall back on the old favourites, giving up chocolate and / or alcohol. And again, this is fine.

After all, we are trying to identify with Jesus and his ultimate denial of himself to take up his cross. But often a worthy goal can crowd out spiritual improvement – we want a double whammy – less expenditure perhaps, and more holiness, or less weight and more godliness!

So Lent courses can often start with us – we begin by focussing on our pretty abject failure to live as God wants us to live.

We will not be ignoring this Lenten tradition and discipline! We *will* be doing some self-examination and acknowledging our faults at a point in each session. But for the next 4 weeks will be thinking primarily about God's grace and gifting and our response. And our *starting* point for our 2022 Lent course and for this first session is God! Specifically, God's grace.

And so to a question:

What do you understand by "Grace"?

How would you explain God's grace to a non church person?

Take a moment or two to think about those questions

Perhaps you came up with words like **love, forgiveness, acceptance, unconditional, blessing ...**

And if you did, gold star!

And if you added something like **for everyone**, have another gold star!

You may have grown up, as I did, with the old acrostic for Grace:

God's Riches At Christ's Expense

but although that's neat and easy to remember, I think that needs a bit of unpacking for today, (it also ignores God's grace evident in the Old Testament – more of that later!) so let's go with :

"Grace is the unearned, undeserved, love, forgiveness, acceptance, kindness, favour and blessing of God, poured out unconditionally for every person"

Think about that definition for a moment Would you want to add or subtract anything?

This is a definition, not only of God's grace in terms of what God does, (loves, forgives etc.) but also of what God is ! (God is love, God is God of forgiveness etc)

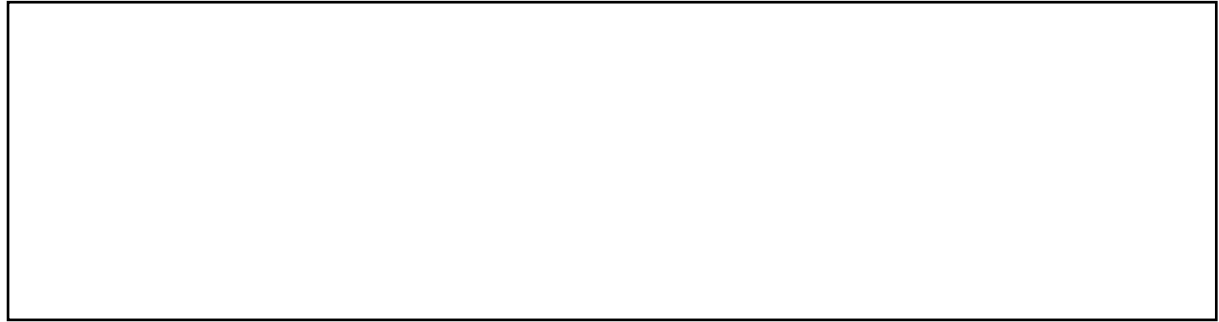
'Grace' describes who God is – God's *attributes* – as well as *what God does* – God's *actions*.

So another question!

How do we know what someone is like?

And another. So how do we know what God is like?

Take a moment to think!



I suggest we get to know what God is like in much the same way as we get to know another human person. We spend time together, we see them interacting with other people and responding to situations. We talk and listen to them. And with God we do much of this by reading and thinking about what scripture tells us about God.

So let's turn to scripture.

There are references to God's grace – who God is and what God does – in the Old Testament: eg

- Psalm 38: "... the Lord is... gracious ..."
- Jeremiah 31: God's reminder, through the prophet Jeremiah, that through God's everlasting love the Israelites found grace – the means to survive – in the wilderness.

But it's in the New Testament, particularly the epistles, the New Testament letters, that we come to this word "grace" again and again.

But let's start with a gospel passage – the opening of John's gospel.

Read John 1: 1- 5, 10-14 below

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was in the beginning with God. ³ All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being ⁴ in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. ⁵ The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

¹⁰ He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. ¹¹ He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. ¹² But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to

become children of God, ¹³ who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

¹⁴ And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth

Take a moment to think –

What do we learn from these verses about the nature of God?

This passage tells us who Jesus is, (pre-existed, source of all life and light, sociable! Desirous of gathering children!) with the summary statement about the nature of God in verse 14: God is "... full of grace (and truth)."

So why is God full of grace? Or, more importantly for us, What is the purpose of God's grace?

Stick a pin in that question for a moment and read on – **John 1, verses 16 & 17**

¹⁶ From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. ¹⁷The Law indeed was given through Moses: grace and truth came through Jesus Christ

So the purpose of God's grace is ...?

I think John makes 2 points in response to that question:

- a) so God could bestow on us all manner of blessings
- b) so God could rescue us / save us

Let's think for a moment about a)

This idea of *abundance* of grace, 'grace upon grace', is something that comes again and again through the epistles – Ephesians talks about 'riches' & 'immeasurable riches', the first letter of Peter, 'manifold' grace. God's grace is limitless.

and b)

John contrasts Jesus with Moses to spell out the seismic change that Jesus has made for the human race. Moses was the means by which God delivered the law... with its emphasis on observance and obedience. And thus we have the theme that runs through the whole OT: people's failure to live in obedience to the law and the consequence – that they bring punishment from God on themselves and they are separated from God.

Contrast Jesus – who brings God's grace into our world – “unearned, undeserved, love, forgiveness, acceptance, kindness, favour and blessing of God, poured out unconditionally for every person” and gives humankind a different narrative – one of close, restored relationship with God.

Paul picks this up in his letter to the church in Rome – **Romans 5: 20-21**. Here it is from The Message translation:

God's law was given so that all people could see how sinful they were. But as people sinned more and more, God's wonderful grace became more abundant. So just as sin ruled over all people and brought them to death, now God's wonderful grace rules instead, giving us right standing with God and resulting in eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Where sin increased, grace increased – to work in us for the here and now and so that we come to completion in the presence of God.

God is no less God of justice where sin is concerned but the terrible consequences of our sin is now dealt with by the abundance of God's grace.

The late John Rogerson, former professor of biblical studies at Sheffield University, had a great phrase to underline the difference Jesus made:

“Imperatives of justice and structures of grace” – While God's people in Old Testament times lived under the imperatives of justice, their structures of grace, for example, sacrifice, Jesus opened the floodgates to allow God's grace to transform our relationship with God – and our lives.

‘Grace for Salvation and Sanctification’ is another great phrase (author unknown): God is God of grace for our salvation – and for our journey towards holiness, not just during Lent, but steadily and constantly.

If you would like to **pause here for a moment, read slowly the paragraph in italics below then close your eyes for a few moments and sit with this truth ...**

*Regardless of who we are, what we are like,
regardless of our actions, past, present and future,
regardless of our thoughts, our words, our attitudes,
regardless of **all** the ways we fail to live as we know we should,
despite how broken we are ...*

the unearned, undeserved, love, forgiveness, acceptance, kindness, favour and blessing of God, that is grace, is poured out – unconditionally – over you ... into you. That grace is surrounding, holding you – it dwells within you and will carry you into God’s presence.

Let that sink in, again... And in the quiet, you might want to **acknowledge your faults and failings, give to God the things you regret, the things of which you are ashamed – and then give thanks to God for the gift of grace you have received by faith, that has and will continue to be poured out to you.**

Let’s move now to the second and last part of our session: thinking about who we are in relation to the God of grace – and the implications of that.

The epistles are riddled with references to those who call Jesus ‘Lord’ being children of God.

Here are 2 examples from Galatians “*For you are all children of God through faith in Christ Jesus*” (3:26) ... ‘*you are no longer a slave, but a child; and if a child, then an inheritor through God ...* (4:7)

So as children of God, we are children of grace – our life here and now and into eternity is assured by the grace of God and we live here and now with the grace of God at work in us.

Think!

As children of God, who have inherited grace, what does it mean to live with grace within us?

Hold that question and read Romans 12, verses 1-2 below

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. ² Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.

Have a minute to think about those verses in relation to that question
what does it mean for you in real, practical terms to live with grace at work in you?

And now, think hard about yourself. What is *one aspect* of yourself that needs to be transformed by the grace of God at work in you this Lent?

Pause here and think ... then talk to God

Having written about grace at work in us as individual believers, Paul moves on, in the same chapter, to unpack this “living with grace at work in us” in relation to our corporate life as believers gathered in one place.

Read verses 3 to 8 below

³ For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. ⁴ For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, ⁵ so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. ⁶ We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ⁷ ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; ⁸ the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.

That is our launch for session 2, when we will be thinking about the different nature of gifts

So in preparation for that, you may care to

- **Read** those 5 verses again (and if you can, read on to the end of the chapter) and note what stands out for you.
- **Think** about the list of gifts in verses 6 to 8
- And **begin to think** what you would say if someone said to you “what is *your* gift?” (we’ll pick this up in session 3 but start thinking now!)

But now, let’s draw this session to a close.

- We have thought about God’s grace
and tried to move beyond the familiarity of the word to realise again the sheer, awesome, wonder of God’s grace to us.
- We have thought about who we are in relation to God
and how as children of the God of grace we are called to show that grace in our lives.

Next time we will be exploring the different kinds of grace and the variety of gifts God has poured out to each of us. But now we end with prayer.

Lord of grace, source of grace, I am sorry for not always recognising your grace to me and what that means for me now and into eternity. I am sorry for not recognising who I am in relation to you. I am sorry for not recognising my call as a child of the God of grace.

*In your grace and mercy forgive me, cleanse me and fill me again with your Holy Spirit, so my life can be marked by grace and lived to your praise and glory. **Amen***