

SERMON 11 MARCH LENT 4

Today is one of the days when it feels as though we need fewer rather than more words. But it is words, by and large, that we deal in. In the readings we just listened to from Ephesians and John's gospel, we heard two of the best known and most loved texts in the New Testament: from John, "God loved the world so much that he gave his one and only Son that whoever believes in him may not perish but have eternal life"; then from Ephesians "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this not from yourselves it is the gift of God." Two gifts. Two priceless gifts.

Both of these readings place this gift of life in the context of the alternative: for John, the darkness and sinful ways of a world that does not see, or chooses not to see; for the writer of Ephesians, ways of living that focus on the self and following fleshly desires. These are ways of living that would rather not be exposed to the light. They make even more striking John's statement that "God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him". Likewise, to the Ephesians, the words: "Because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in our transgressions." We are being told of God's gift which is offered even when totally unwarranted. It tells us of what we only dimly glimpse about what God is about. Maybe we understand God's purpose in Jesus even better when we use the other translation of John's Greek word for "saved" so we hear "God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to heal the world through him". God's purpose is to gather all the world, all of creation into a place where brokenness is healed, and life is made whole.

It is very easy to turn the gospel and our faith into an on-going tussle between our sinful, worldly nature, which is always there, and what we have to overcome, to do, in order to be better Christians. And so, we miss God's grace. We crowd it out, even though we long for it. I wonder why! Is it because we become so busy that we feel the need to be doing all the time, and doing in our own way, which means in our own strength? I can't remember who it was that said: "God has given us a gift and we insist on paying for it". What these readings today are doing is asking only openness from us, to see what we are being given.

The gift of God: the gift of Jesus the Christ and the gift of grace; both of which are poured out from God's heart of love. It takes openness on our part to receive these, yet it is this acceptance that defines us as Christians. Someone was telling me recently about being at a meeting where there were some important people from the local council. One of them, seeing that my friend was a minister, made the comment that all religion was really about being good, doing the right thing, just the same as it should be for everyone. A woman there, a Catholic, said "I think there is more to it than that. As a Christian, my faith is about being in a relationship with God, not just doing good". Glimpsing God's love and grace opens us up to that relationship, to the vertical dimension of life that is so integral to our wholeness and to our ability to relate across the horizontal to our neighbour.

God's grace is at the heart of all our relationships. God's grace and God's love – God's gifts to us. The fact that this is so freely and abundantly given overwhelms us. It takes us way beyond our human capacity. It also calls us to see ourselves as part of the whole of God's creation. Remember, "God loved the world so much", not just the

people, but the world. We are part of something much bigger that God loves and that God wants to bring to healing. Our relationship is with God and so with the whole of the world that is part of God's gift to us to love also. The fact that we, like people throughout time, fail so badly as we focus on our own needs and wants and blight the very earth, its waters and its air, still does not place us beyond God's grace and love. As we heard today we are told "because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions – it is by grace you have been saved". God longs for healing of it all.

There is so much for us to learn about God's love and grace; so much for us to allow in, all the time, because the scale and scope of it is immeasurable for us. We are given reminders all the time as we open our eyes to see the creation around us, even in our cities, and we are asked to see, to see ourselves not as separate but as a part of it all. Richard Rohr writes: "In the Genesis story, God's love, beauty and goodness overflow into creation; and all creatures, including humans, are living peacefully in God's presence. Isaiah prophesies the "peaceable kingdom" to come, which is symbolised by animals living in peace. In Revelation, John hears 'every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, everything in the universe' giving God 'blessing and honour, glory and might for ever and ever.' Finally, John sees 'a new heaven and a new earth' and the Bible ends with a new garden, complete with 'the river of life-giving water' and 'the tree of life'".

It often happens that it is in the moments when we know ourselves to be in relationship with the creation we are reminded of God's grace and

love; we are uplifted, drawn out of ourselves and away from the things in our lives that weigh us down. So, let us allow ourselves a bit of space to contemplate the scale of God's love and grace as we listen to some music. (*Look at the world*)

“God loved the world so much that he sent his only Son so that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save, to heal the world through him”. “By grace you have been saved, through faith – and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God.”

A free gift, immense, immeasurable. We need to open our arms wide to receive it. Then, when we have received it, we can respond out of love in the ways that offer God's light and love to those to whom we are called by God. When we have received God's gift of love and grace we can lift up to God in prayer those we know to be in need, those whose lives are darkened by lack of love or freedom, those who have been overwhelmed by the struggles they have faced. We can do this with thankfulness in the knowledge that God loves the whole world and waits to offer healing and life.

As we contemplate God's love and grace and are opened up to that vertical relationship with God, and to the horizontal relationship with everything alongside us, we find that the cross is at the meeting point of those relationships. On this Lenten journey where the Jerusalem, Gethsemane and Golgotha lie ahead, we are being prepared to see all that God offers us in Jesus, freely, abundantly, always.