

## LENT COURSE 2019 ALL SAINTS, FOURWAYS GARDENS

### GRACE

#### Ash Wednesday 6<sup>th</sup> March: THE NATURE OF GRACE

Grace is undeserved, unearned favour – the favour God demonstrates when He loves us freely, forgives us completely, pours His life into us abundantly, gives us joy and hope, awakens us to His love, gives us power, etcetera.

It is 'God's riches at Christ's expense'- we receive all the benefits of Christ's life, death and resurrection, all the spiritual blessings God has available for us, through Christ, by the Holy Spirit. God's riches are inexhaustible.

Grace is 'God's empowering presence' – the experienced presence of God, that makes a real difference to our experience of life, and our ability to do things.

Grace provides us with another chance – over and over again.

Grace is God's mercy, expressed extravagantly, poured out lavishly, offered unconditionally, generously, to all who want to receive.....

Grace wipes the slate clean.

Grace is respectful of our free will, never pushy or demanding; it always recognizes and affirms our dignity; it never makes us cower, crawl or beg.

The source of grace is God, and the model of grace is Jesus. God, by His grace, enables us to become gracious and be gracious.

For us, it is hard to extend grace to a person who has offended us and is unaware of it, or aware of it, but is unrepentant and shows no remorse.

Jesus, after His resurrection, graciously reinstates Peter, who had denied Jesus three times. God's grace does not free us from acknowledging our wrongdoing: Jesus asks Peter three times, "Do you love me?" We need to face up to our past, and our wrongdoing, and ask God for another chance.

God's grace reconciles, brings us into right relationship with Him, enabling us to relate to Him as Abba, Father.

God shows His forgiveness by giving us work to do, and trusts us to do it: Jesus says to Peter three times, "Feed my sheep". We might disgrace ourselves, and show ourselves to be completely unreliable – but God restores our dignity, believes in us, honours us.

God turns things around: He can redeem, and use for His purposes, everything that happens – even when we blow it, hugely.

Although grace (God) forgives completely, it still requires that we accept responsibility for what we have done, face the consequences (sometimes), and make restitution (make amends) whenever possible.

The Church is not the place for those who are wonderfully righteous, but for those who accept God's offer of another chance. We come to Church to thank God for grace, to worship Him as the author and source of grace, and to receive grace. We go out from Church to extend grace. God's offer of another chance enables the possibility of transformation.

C S Lewis said that grace is what distinguishes Christianity from all other religions.

Bono, lead singer of U2, points out that all other religions and belief systems are based on 'karma': you get what you deserve. Bono sings, "What once was hurt/What once was friction/What left a mark/No longer stings/Because grace makes beauty out of ugly things".

GRACE: The story of unconditional love and its power to redeem even the most hardened person.

#### EVIDENCE OF GOD'S GRACE IN TODAY'S SCRIPTURES

Isaiah 58:1-12 God had called Israel into a covenant relationship with Himself, whereby she would be His treasured possession, out of all the nations of the earth. Israel would be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. This Covenant of grace was established, after God had delivered the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt, on Mount Sinai, through Moses. God, by His grace, chose the Israelites, a small and insignificant people. They, in response, showed a decided lack of grace by being rebellious and sinful; grumbling and unfaithful; appearing to seek God's ways, but abandoning His commands; exploiting their workers; engaging in quarrels and fight; tolerating injustice and oppression; not caring for the poor, the hungry, the homeless, the naked; engaging in malicious talk, and so on. Their disobedience and lack of grace prevents them from receiving further grace from God: light, guidance, provision for their needs, strength, prosperity and restoration.

Psalm 51 David repents of his adultery with Bathsheba, knowing his desperate need of God's forgiveness. It is an honest, humble plea for cleansing, acknowledging God's gracious, unfailing love and great compassion. We know that God graciously forgave David – but, somehow, the consequence of his adultery (and scheming, and murder) was that he and Bathsheba lost their child, conceived in this illicit relationship. This was interpreted as punishment by God. Although we find it a difficult (or unacceptable) interpretation, this does reveal how, sometimes, we cannot escape the consequences of our sin – despite receiving the grace of God's forgiveness. Because David's repentance and remorse were extensive and genuine, David still became a great king, ushering in Israel's golden age of prosperity. He is described as 'a man after God's own heart'. Just as forgiveness is a grace – unearned and undeserved – so is repentance: we cannot truly repent unless God graciously touches our hearts, causing us to humble ourselves before Him and confess our sin sincerely.

2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10 We are reconciled to God by Christ's death and our acceptance of Christ's saving work. We cannot be reconciled to God unless God, by His Spirit, prompts a response of faith, enabling us to come into a new relationship with Him. God's grace is revealed in God's plan that He would take human flesh in Jesus, and that Jesus, Who knew no sin, would become sin for us, to make it possible for us to become God's righteousness. We receive God's grace in vain if we live for ourselves. God has heard us, in the time of His favour; God has helped us, in the day of salvation. By God's grace, we are able to endure troubles, hardships, difficulties, etcetera. By God's grace, we are given purity, understanding, patience, kindness, sincere love, truthful speech, power, righteousness. We face glory, dishonour, good (or bad) reputation, recognition (or lack thereof) – everything, good or bad, because God provides us with the grace to cope.

Matthew 6:1-6;16-21 God prompts us to engage in acts of grace and discipline, like giving to the needy, praying and fasting – and doing these things quietly, sincerely, humbly, without others knowing. By God's grace, and by doing this, we 'store up treasures in heaven'.

Anything we do during Lent that is good and commendable, we will do as a response to God's grace, and we will do by God's grace – any act which signifies repentance; any act of righteousness; any spiritual discipline; any act of self-denial..... It will be an acknowledgment that God, by His grace, has made the first move (God always takes the initiative). God, first, imparted grace, which prompted our action. Anything we think, do or say, that has any merit, is initiated, and enabled, by God, Whose grace is infinite.