



Service for Personal or Private Use 7th June 2020 – Trinity Sunday

Through Jesus we all have access by the one Spirit to the Father. (Ephesians 2 v18)

Let us come close to God the Holy Trinity in humble confidence and reverent trust. Let us not attempt to reduce God to the scale of our minds or understanding!

Psalm 8 is a wonderful celebration of God's majesty, and that he takes notice of us.

Hymn *Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty* (H&P 7 StF 11 MP 237)

Prayer

God our Father, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, in spirit we bow before you. Yours was the word of command that called into being everything that is. Yours was the wisdom that conceived and planned, and yours is the power that sustains all things. Yours is the love that breathes life into every human soul, and yours the image in which we were formed. Yours is the invitation that makes us welcome as we worship.

Lord Jesus Christ, the one true and perfect revelation of the whole being of God, we pause in wonder before you. In grace and love you stooped down to earth, born among us and as one of us. Your life is the pattern of perfection; your words are truth sufficient to instruct us and wisdom sufficient to guide us; your deeds of compassion display the reality of God's Kingdom on earth. Though all the glory of heaven was yours, you emptied yourself and submitted to perfect obedience; you who were served by angels could say you had not come to be served but to serve, and to give your life a ransom for many. In the God-forsakenness of the cross, and the dazzling brilliance of Resurrection, we find pardon for our sins, reconciliation with the holiness of God, and the entry to new life.

Holy Spirit, sent from the Father to continue the work of our Saviour, it is by you that we confess that Jesus is Lord. You bear witness with our spirit that we have been born of God. You are the seal of our inclusion within the family of God. You lead the pilgrim people of God and you inspire our prayer and worship.

Come, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Fill our hearts and lives with your glory. So may our prayer, our worship, and our serving be acceptable to you; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Bible Reading – Matthew chapter 28 verses 16-20

It is sometimes questioned whether the instruction to baptize in the name (notice that 'name' is singular, not plural) of the Father and Son and Holy Spirit could have been spoken by Jesus, even after his resurrection. Whatever the truth may be (and there are plenty of first-rank scholars who do accept the words as authentic), we can certainly trace the origins of belief in the Trinity back to the very early days of the Church. It is significant that one of the places is in the sign of Christian beginning – baptism. None of the first believers could have been baptized as a baby; every one of them was acknowledging their own personal trust and commitment. Without such a faith, baptism (whenever it was administered) is an empty and meaningless act.

Have I made real by my own response to the grace of God, all that was promised at my baptism?

Hymn *Father, we love you* (StF 6 MP 142) If you are using H&P you might use 791 *Father, Son and Holy Ghost* or some other favourite.

Bible Reading – 2nd Corinthians chapter 13 verses 11 to 14

That's right. This is where those words with which we so often end services and meetings were first written. But search as you will, you will not find the word 'Trinity' in the Bible. It took the church some four centuries of debate and argument – yes, and falling out – to express this article of faith. It still stretches the best of minds, and still seems to raise more questions than it provides answers.

It seems to defy sense and logic, as we appear to be saying that $1 + 1 + 1 = 1$, which cannot be true. (Advanced mathematicians may be more satisfied with $\aleph + \aleph + \aleph = \aleph$) If like at least 99% of people you haven't a clue what that means, don't worry, even though it is true!

It wasn't that they were trying to make life difficult for us. They were struggling to make sense of their encounter with God. Those first Christians were Jewish, and knew beyond a shadow of doubt that there was only one God: there is not room for more than one Supreme Being. Their great creed had it, "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one..." (Deuteronomy 6 v 4 – known as the *Shema*, which is its first word in Hebrew). Yet their experience of Jesus and their observation of all he said and did, drove them to the conclusion that this was their God, and no ordinary (or even *extraordinary*) man. And after Pentecost their experiences of the Holy Spirit showed them that the Spirit was a Person and not a thing or an influence, and that this third Person was also God.

Paul was not introducing a totally new idea when he finished this letter to Corinth with "The Grace." Neither was it privately dreamt up by him or any of the other apostles. He was affirming the experience they all had shared, and which you and I share too. His prayer was that they – and we – might know it more and more.

Is that your prayer when you say it at the end of a service?

As we pull it apart we shall find that it is all based on experience.

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ

Of course, he could have started with the Father or the Spirit, but chose the Lord Jesus first. And what he found in Jesus was "grace." It is truly 'Amazing grace!' as John Newton expressed it. He had been a sailor in the slave trade. He had earned a reputation among his fellow sailors for the great vulgarity and blasphemy of the songs he sang – so bad that even they were shocked. If ever a man seemed to have forfeited the right to approach God it was this man. But in the middle of a terrifying storm in the Bay of Biscay he found himself calling out to God, and he was heard. It would be several years before he fully appreciated the evils of the Slave Trade and quit it. After ordination he became a great campaigner for abolition alongside Wilberforce. God's Amazing Grace had turned him round, had made a new man of him.

Grace is when God gives us generously those good things to which we have no right. Grace is when he shows mercy to those who know they deserve condemnation. Grace is when he seeks us (like lost sheep) and rescues us, no matter the cost to him: he was crucified for us. It's why some Christians use the letters of 'Grace' to spell: **G**od's **R**iches **A**t **C**hrist's **E**xpense.

Paul knew that grace had taken hold of him while he was Christ's zealous enemy. As he preached the gospel around the Mediterranean nations he saw life after life wonderfully changed. Thieves no longer stole. Habitual liars became truthful. Adulterers and the immoral forsook their ways. The selfish became generous. Drunkards became sober. John Wesley saw it in the 18th century, as William Booth saw it in the 19th. It is still God's Amazing Grace today.

A group of academics were discussing what was unique about the Christian faith. They found parallels in other religions to belief in one God, or that he is Creator, sacrifice for sin, death and resurrection; all these and more seemed to be found in one religion or another. C S Lewis came into the room, and they put the question to him. "That's easy," he replied, "the unique thing about Christianity is Grace." He was right.

Paul knew it. He had told the Corinthians about it, just as he told every other church. The Ephesians were told they had been saved by grace through faith. The Romans were told they had been justified freely by grace. The Colossians had understood the grace of God in truth. In this letter Paul had reminded them that they "know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich yet for our sakes he became poor, so that we through his poverty might be made rich." He told them about

the long struggle he had had concerning an affliction that he called “a thorn in the flesh.” After much prayer he got the answer, “My grace is sufficient for you. My strength is made perfect in weakness.” Perhaps I might alter what I wrote above: ‘Grace’ is God’s Resources At Christ’s Empowering.

The love of God

To us this seems obvious. But if you had grown up in Corinth in the first century it would have been astounding. To them, the gods were distant and unpredictable. You offered your sacrifices to keep them from harming you, but scarcely thought they took any real interest in you; certainly it was inconceivable that they should *love* you. Provided you ‘doffed your cap’ to them from time to time, it was as if you had paid your insurance premium.

So it was astonishing to hear that “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son,” or that “God commends his love towards us, in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us.” Of course, not everything that is called ‘love’ is lovely; it can always be twisted by selfishness and exploitation; excuses can be made for great wickedness under the smoke-screen of ‘love.’ We know, too, that the love of chocolate, the love of a pet, the love of a country-walk, and the love between husband and wife are very different, even though they use the same word.

The love God has for us is measured by the span of the cross. It was his great desire to rescue us from the mess we all make of life, to set us free from the habits that enslave us. His loving and longing was all to transform us into the image of his one true Son. Here was the story of a God who cared about every detail of our life. He was not a Father Christmas figure, patting us on the head while saying “It doesn’t matter.” It matters so much to the God who loves us that Jesus died for us. And while the gods of Corinth were fickle, the love of the Father is constant. It is an everlasting love, as he said through Jeremiah. He told Moses that he was a God “abounding in steadfast love and mercy.” He loves us as we are; and he loves us too much to let us remain as we are. That is Gospel! These people who had once been nobodies (as Paul had reminded them in 1st Corinthians 1 verses 26-30) had become the valued children of God. It was all true to experience. They were loved, and nobody can take that from us.

The fellowship of the Holy Spirit

Several strands of meaning are woven together in this simple expression. “Fellowship” can mean ‘partnership’ as we share in some activity that needs the participation of all. It can mean ‘having in common,’ as we belong in the church. It can mean ‘following alongside one another,’ as the Spirit leads us. The fellowship “of the Holy Spirit” can mean the fellowship that the Holy Spirit creates, because he unites us to one another; or it can mean that we are all sharing in what the Holy Spirit gives to the Church; or it can mean that we each receive gifts from the Holy Spirit which we use for the blessing of others. We don’t have to choose between any of these, because they all have something of truth and relevance in them.

Once again, we notice that the appeal is to their experience. This is how they have encountered God and experienced him in their lives. There is nothing like it in the world. I have worked in a research laboratory, and played in football teams; I have been part of the teaching staff in a school, and I have played in an orchestra; I have been a member of societies, and I have attended meetings of the Football Referees’ Association. In every case we had something important in common; but none of them was a “fellowship.” Why? Because Christian fellowship is so much richer, so much deeper. A graveyard is full of people who have something very important in common: they are dead. They are very close together, but there is no fellowship because none of them contributes anything for the betterment of the rest.

It is always good to see how people hang around and talk after services. “By this we know that we have passed from death into life, that we love our fellow Christians,” wrote St John in his first letter.

But the chat isn't fellowship. It only becomes fellowship when it includes the Holy Spirit. It becomes fellowship when it offers help and encouragement to our sister or brother; when we share some precious insight into God's word or work; when we undertake to pray for some difficult situation they may be facing; when we trust them with some problem or trial in which we need the grace of God. How different that is from the light conversations which are pleasant and good, but do not bring me closer to Jesus.

The Trinity is not meant to be an exercise in logic. It is not like the Queen in *Alice* who could believe six impossible things before breakfast. It is the Church's way of insisting that the one true God is met and known in grace, and in love, and in fellowship. Anything less, and it isn't God.

How far does my Christian experience match this?

Where reason fails with all her powers, there faith prevails, and love adores.

[Isaac Watts H&P 18, StF16]

Prayers

Almighty and everlasting God, you have given your servants grace, by the confession of a true faith, to acknowledge the glory of the eternal Trinity and in the power of the divine majesty to worship the Unity.

Keep us steadfast in this faith, that we may evermore be defended from all adversities; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Father God, you have created all things and through Christ revealed your salvation in all the world. Give us a vision of your glory and by your Holy Spirit fill us with life and love that we may praise and serve you through Jesus Christ our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Our God and Father, whose greatness is beyond our ability to tell, and matched only by your love and goodness, we dare to trust you with our cares and concerns, our hopes and longings. Days and weeks of restrictions turn into months, and still we pray for conditions to be right for the easing. Much more we pray for those who are not just inconvenienced by the pandemic. We pray for those who have contracted the virus, whether they are in isolation or in hospital. We pray for those who are treating them – not just the doctors and nurses, but also the porters and cleaners, the ambulance crews and the cooks, the pharmacists and the researchers, the 'Test and Trace' personnel.

We pray that as some restrictions are lifted the new freedoms won't be abused, putting more lives in danger. We pray that while some are able to return to something like 'normal' and others still must take precautions, there may be wisdom and patience on all sides.

We pray for the decision-makers and policy-creators, that they may be led to right solutions and be protective of the most vulnerable. We pray that their example may match their advice, and that their advice will be well-informed.

We pray for our church family, for those we have recently been in touch with, and those we haven't. We pray that we all may know that deep fellowship of the Holy Spirit, and that when we can meet together again we will value its strength the more.

The Lord's Prayer

Hymn *All praise to our redeeming Lord* (H&P 753 StF 608 MP 19) –note especially its celebration of fellowship in the final verse!

When we say '**The Grace**' today, pause after each phrase to remember what you are praying for the rest of us. Perhaps on this occasion you might like to add an extra prayer, putting it in your own words. It is part of *being* the fellowship in the Holy Spirit.