

Sunday 30th August 2020

Grace has been given - Isaiah 49:1-7, Ephesians 4:7-16

Talk by Ian Baldwin, Prayers by Julian Providence

Hello, and welcome to our online service. My name is Ian and today we will be thinking about how "Grace has been given" by looking at two bible readings. Firstly, Isaiah 49 v1-7 and then Ephesians 4 v7-16.

Let me pray as we start.

Lord thank you that we can take this time to focus on you. Help us to set aside all the busyness and worries of the week so we might listen to you and know your peace. Amen.

Now our prayers written by Julian, and then that will be followed by our readings.

Let us pray.

Father thank you for your presence with us here this morning. Thank you, Lord, for bringing us all safely through another week. Thank you for your faithfulness to us - for protecting us and sustaining our health, maintaining your love and care for us, for the blessings that bring us joy and happiness and times of rest and for sustaining us through difficult times. For simply giving us food and a place to live and all the other blessings we so often miss. Forgive us when we don't acknowledge your loving kindness and dependence on you. Thank you for all you've done and continue to do in our lives. Thank you most of all for giving your life for us to have eternal life with you. One day we shall see you face to face but until then our lives are hidden in you with the father (Col 3:3).

Lord as the effects of coronavirus continue to ripple out into our society and across the world, we ask for your hand of protection over our nation. We continue to pray over our government that you would give them foresight and wisdom in planning what is best to protect public health while balancing the needs of our economy, our services and maintaining a healthy and functioning society. Our government, sometimes because of the sheer enormity of the task and sometimes because of lack of planning, does not always get its decisions right. Please help us as your church not to be complacent but to continue to ask for your help and watchful guidance through the pandemic and please will you steer this nation and the world to a place of safety from the virus.

We think of our nation completing the transition period out of the EU in 4 months time. We know that you have the future of this nation in your hands. Whatever the outcome of this final period of negotiation, would you use the coming months and years to achieve your purposes for our nation.

We look across the world to the US where another shooting by police of a black person has triggered protests in Wisconsin while during the protests another two people have died. We

pray against the evil one who loves to sow discord and hatred. We know that you are greater than he that is in this world. We ask by your power that you would stand against the spread of this evil and remove the power to continue to cause division. Holy Spirit let your light and truth and justice shine in those communities affected by injustice and oppression in the US. Lord would you raise up leaders in government who will speak out your truth and your justice. Please in our own nation also help us to establish a society that strives for the standards of justice and compassion that you desire and banishes racial hatred from our shores.

We continue to lift Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe imprisoned in Iran without proven charges and also British-Australian Kylie Moore-Gilbert, now in a notorious women's prison. We ask that the Iranian authorities would protect these women and afford them human rights even while holding them captive. Lord please would you release them soon and change the heart of the British government to wholeheartedly seek their release.

Lord, these are but two people imprisoned and oppressed out of many hundreds of thousands in our world. We think of Belarus in the news at this time, Yemen, Russia, China and Hong Kong, Eritrea, Saudi Arabia and so many other nations. Lord we remember our brothers and sisters facing persecution for standing for you. Thank you that you are with your suffering church, that you know each and every one and that those who lose their lives for your sake will be forever in your presence. Help us to understand the true meaning of faith in you as witnessed by your suffering church.

We pray for St John's. Thank you for the privilege and the fellowship of continuing to be able to meet. Thank you to those who lead and sustain St John's week after week, who organise prayer meetings, home groups, run CAP and foodbank and keep on top of finances. Sustain them Lord. Thank you for each and every one of us here this morning. We ask for your Holy Spirit to remain with us, guide us, protect us continue to lead us in the path that you have set out for us. We thank you for our vision to Care, Involve and Build and to "make St John's a home for everyone". Keep your vision burning brightly before us and prompt us to see ways we can live this out.

We pray for your protection over St John's as we continue to open for prayer. We ask that those who come will meet with you and that this will continue to be a witness of your light and your love in our community. We continue to pray for when our new church leader will be here, knowing that you already have the right person for St John's. Help us to be ready.

Finally, we lift our own needs and the needs of those close to us before you loving God, knowing that you hear us. Just take a moment to do that and then we'll say the Lord's Prayer... Stay close to us Lord - particularly those of us who find the continued separation, changes and restrictions difficult and for those who've lost loved ones - be present with each one of us, restore us and heal us.

And so we pray...

**Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done on Earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.
Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours, now and forever. Amen**

Our first reading is Isaiah 49:1-7

Isaiah 49 v1-7

49 Listen to me, you islands;
hear this, you distant nations:
Before I was born the LORD called me;
from my mother's womb he has spoken my name.
2 He made my mouth like a sharpened sword,
in the shadow of his hand he hid me;
he made me into a polished arrow
and concealed me in his quiver.
3 He said to me, "You are my servant,
Israel, in whom I will display my splendour."
4 But I said, "I have laboured in vain;
I have spent my strength for nothing at all.
Yet what is due me is in the LORD's hand,
and my reward is with my God."
5 And now the LORD says—
he who formed me in the womb to be his servant
to bring Jacob back to him
and gather Israel to himself,
for I am honoured in the eyes of the LORD
and my God has been my strength—
6 he says:
"It is too small a thing for you to be my servant
to restore the tribes of Jacob
and bring back those of Israel I have kept.
I will also make you a light for the Gentiles,
that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth."
7 This is what the LORD says—
the Redeemer and Holy One of Israel—
to him who was despised and abhorred by the nation,
to the servant of rulers:
"Kings will see you and stand up,
princes will see and bow down,
because of the LORD, who is faithful,
the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you."

Our second reading comes from Ephesians 4:7-16

Ephesians 4 v7-16

7 But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it. **8** This is why it says:

“When he ascended on high,
he took many captives
and gave gifts to his people.”

9 (What does “he ascended” mean except that he also descended to the lower, earthly regions? **10** He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe.) **11** So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, **12** to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up **13** until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

14 Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming. **15** Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. **16** From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.

This is the word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

In Isaiah 49 it is the second of the servant songs.

God's people have gone astray and are in exile in Babylon. Here we read that God has a plan to rescue them. The sword of God's word will slay all the evil and end the enmity between God and humanity. Jesus is the word who is kept ready by God like an arrow in his quiver. When God sends his word, it will pierce the hearts of people like an arrow but will ultimately bring healing when they call on God's mercy.

In response Judah and Israel may not return to God but Christ will be glorious in fulfilling his task to be a light to the gentiles and bring salvation to the ends of the earth.

God's pardoning mercy is release from the curse of the law and his renewing grace is release from the dominion of sin. All of this is found in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. God often calls unlikely people to be his servants who often don't recognise themselves but just as Christ had all he needed to fulfil the task so to God equips those he calls to do his work.

This theme of equipping the servants of God is picked up in our reading from Ephesians 4.

The passage is in two parts:

- v7-12 show how we are enriched by our diversity
- v13-16 calls for our growth to maturity.

Now v4-6 which Kemi spoke about last week is about all of us and points to our unity. The word 'one' is important. One body, one spirit, one hope, one lord, one faith, one baptism one God.

Our passage begins by speaking about each of us and points to our diversity, our individuality. Paul deliberately shows our unity is not uniformity. The church is not all beige but a rich tapestry of colour. This is not just about our different personalities but our gifts, talents and abilities which God has graciously given for our mutual help to build the body of Christ which is his church.

V7 Grace is given as Christ apportions it. Saving grace is given to all who believe. That is the grace that saves sinners. This grace here is service grace and is given to equip God's people for service and is given in different degrees to different people at different times. These are the so-called charismatic gifts

v8-9 Quote Psalm 68 which is a psalm where the people call for God to rescue and vindicate them as in the past. Is 49 is Gods response to such a call.

Paul sees an analogy here with the exultation of Jesus in Gods triumph over death and evil. The captives in his train are defeated principalities and powers of darkness.

Now Christ has graciously poured out on us the gift he has been given by God i.e. the Holy Spirit to live in us and the gifts to help us individuals to grow to maturity and the church to unity.

V11. There are many lists of the gifts in the NT and often in different number and order, so the list is probably not exhaustive and no gift is superior to others. Here Paul refers to the apostles being those who saw the risen Christ and prophets being those who came before the church began. Evangelists however are those who are particularly able to explain the gospel in a relevant and engaging way to non-believers. We all have a duty to share the gospel as 1Pet 3v15" Always be prepared to give an answer to anyone who asks you to give a reason for the hope that you have but do this with gentleness and respect"
The church always needs evangelists.

Teachers and pastors overlap as the feeding and tending of Gods flock are equally important in helping both new and old Christians grow in faith and maturity.
This is a call to see the gifts God has graciously given people and encourage their use and development.

V12. The gifts are to equip God's people (you and me) for the work of ministry or service. And why? To build up the body of Christ (you and me).

Everyone at St Johns is important to the life and work of St Johns.

1 Pet 2v9 says "you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood a holy nation, a people belonging to God"

Paul is calling for every member ministry. The vicar's job is to teach and train and encourage people to discover, use and grow their gifts.

This is why Paul calls the church a body not a bus!

The bus image has the vicar driving while we sit back look out the window and enjoy the ride. Unfortunately, when the driver leaves, we don't know how to drive the bus and don't know where to go!

The body is a good picture but can be pushed too far. I read a story of a vicar who said to the congregation some of you are hands doing practical things for the church and some of you are hearts caring for the church. Then he got carried away and said some of you are like an appendix - we didn't know who you were until you caused so much trouble! Alas he went on. Some are like false teeth - sometimes you're in and sometimes you're out and some are like tonsils - I have no idea what you do and frankly we are better off without you!

We will come to truth and love in a moment.

But I think that when we talk about using gifts a more useful picture is of a stadium full of spectators who are non-believers and we are the team they are watching and the vicar is the manager on the side-lines shouting instruction and encouragement. We are the gifted and talented ones and when we act as a team, we bring the crowds.

All spiritual gifts are given to serve others 1 Cor 12v7 "to each one is given the manifestation of the spirit for the common good".

Everyone is good at something and nobody is good at everything despite what they say!

So, the teaching gifts are primary only because they equip the church with the word of God but together all the gifts build the church.

V13. The aim of building the body is to:

- reach unity in the faith.
- attain knowledge of the son of God
- become mature attaining the whole measure of Christ.

This obviously is the final goal to completely know, trust and grow up into Christ.

We know on this earth that we will always struggle to attain unity and to maintain that unity. It will change sometimes better sometimes worse.

It is something we are gifted for and called to and therefore we must strive for it.

It will bring out in ourselves trust and obedience in God.

V14. Our maturity means we are no longer children although we should be humble and innocent but not ignorant and unstable.

We must have Christ as our anchor so that we are not blow off course and tossed around by every new idea. The reason we should know what the bible says is so that we can resist the cunning, crafty schemes of deceitful people.

V15-16. If we become mature in our faith, then we can speak truth in love.

We will grow up in Christ our head and then from out of Christ the head the whole body will grow.

This picture of the body has its source in Christ. It is off him that the body feeds and gains strength. It is an image we can relate to and understand. The wonder is that the grace of Christ enables not only the whole body but each individual to grow.

So how does it grow?

Truth and love are vital.

It was not loving what the vicar in the story said even if some of it was true.

The addition of "in love brother" does not mean you can hurt and crush people.

Truth here is one of those present future words. It means Truthing in love, i.e. maintaining truth, living truth, doing the truth.

These two elements of truth and love have to be balanced.

Hard-nosed truth can be unkind and crushing.

Love with no boundaries or rules is unhelpful.

Lack of truth can lead to false teaching, shallow relationships and lack of self-knowledge.

Lack of love can lead to hurt, anger and disunity.

Speaking truth and love requires relationship, affirmation and encouragement enables criticism and discipline.

Paul says in v15 that truth and love must be held together

We should be able to do this for the Holy spirit is in us all as believers.

Jesus said in Jn 16v13 "when he, the spirit of truth, comes he will guide you into all truth"

This is about spiritual truth but also spiritual maturity which means we understand how powerful truth is. The first fruit of the Holy Spirit in a Christian life is love. Gal 5v22

We become more Christ like as we grow, and Christ becomes more and more in charge of all parts of our lives. It is hard but God is gracious and merciful.

1 Pet 4v10 "Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in all its various forms"

God's gracious gifts are given for the good of others and that we might grow in maturity having the grace of love and charity rooted deep in our hearts. Only then will we live lives worthy of the one we serve, our Lord Jesus Christ.

AMEN

Thank you for taking time to read this and we hope that you experience Gods love and peace in this coming week. Amen.