

SERMON – 18/11/18

2 Corinthians 13:1-14

‘The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.’ (2 Cor.13:14)

And so we come to the closing words of this second letter to the Corinthians, words with which many a church meeting will have been closed – from Kirk Session and committee meetings to Guild and house-group and prayer meeting – words which are perhaps the most often-quoted of all biblical texts. Did you even know that they came from the Bible (albeit often with the word 'evermore' appended to them)? Here they are in their original context, a conciliatory conclusion to what must have been a difficult letter both to write and to receive, and because of that we must read them as an example of grace in action that it is important for us to emulate.

Let's just remind ourselves briefly of what we have come through in this letter. Paul first took the Good News of Jesus Christ to Corinth around 50 AD and by his preaching the Church was established there and built up over the course of some 18 months until, as was his custom, the apostle felt able to leave its leadership in the hands of local people. Paul kept in touch with what was going on at Corinth through news passed on by his network of contacts, by a second visit sometime in AD55 and by letter, possibly three or four of them including the two that remain for us in the Scriptures. Things were very far from perfect in the Church in Corinth – the Christians both allowed worldly influences to draw them away from their calling as a holy people, and allowed those who had set themselves up as teachers to lead them astray from the truth. There were arguments amongst church members that got so bad that court action was threatened; there were examples of sexual immorality involving at least one church member that would even make today's supposedly enlightened generation blush; and there was confusion amongst some in the church about the extent to which it was appropriate to become involved with people who did not share their Christian faith in such situations as dinner parties at the homes of pagans where the food may have been offered to idols before being set on the dinner table, right through to questions about inter-marriage. All the way through their long-distance relationship, the Corinthians were having Paul's authority called into question at every stage. Some terrible things were said

about him by those who were trying to set themselves up as leaders in the Corinthian Church and that made it all the harder for Paul even to write never mind to visit. Paul had to say some pretty tough things to the Church in Corinth and even though he had said them with the aim of bringing healing and of building them up in the faith, there must have been times when it seemed impossible both in Corinth and from Paul's perspective that they would ever be able to put their differences behind them and be reconciled. And yet here in 2nd Corinthians we read of Paul's plans to visit again – it is probably 57 AD – and we read these closing words that we are looking at this morning, words that could be addressed to us as a Church, as Kirk Session, as a Guild, as a House-group: “And now, my friends, good-bye! Strive for perfection; listen to my appeals; agree with one another; live in peace. And the God of love and peace will be with you. Greet one another with the kiss of peace. All of God's people send you their greetings. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.” (2 Cor.13:11-14)

Shining through those words is the optimism of a faith in God that truly expects the intervention of Jesus by the Holy Spirit to bring healing and reconciliation and peace. Yes, Paul has had to say some difficult things but it is towards the end that there may be perfection amongst the Corinthian Christians and a coming together even with those who have shown malice towards the apostle. With the greetings of the fellow-believers who are with Paul in Macedonia from where he is writing, comes the assurance that much prayer is being offered for the situation into which Paul is writing – the experience of reconciliation and peace stretches from north to south and east to west – they, and we, are one in Christ. And it is in that context that Paul first utters the familiar words of the prayer we call the Grace. It is often said that familiarity breeds contempt, but while I wouldn't go so far as to say we are contemptuous of these oft-repeated words, we probably don't allow them to speak to us as deeply as we should every time we use them.

It is fairly obvious to us that the Grace is Trinitarian in form – it speaks of God (who is the Father), it speaks of the Lord Jesus Christ (the Son) and it speaks of the Holy Spirit – but we are probably not aware that this is one of the most consciously Trinitarian verse in the whole of the New Testament. We are used to hearing the Great Commission in which Jesus commanded us to go and make disciples, baptising in the name of the Father and of the

Son and of the Holy Spirit; but that aside there are very few places where the three Persons of the Godhead are spoken of in such quick succession and with such ease. It may have taken until the Council of Nicaea in the early 4th Century for the doctrine of the Trinity to be thrashed out theologically but I am convinced that Paul's experience of God and the revelations he received that allowed him to preach and teach across such large swathes of the ancient world gave him such an insight into the nature of God that he could write here so naturally of Father, Son and Spirit without the kind of distinction that might suggest they were three different gods.

It is perhaps also worth noting the order in which he mentions them and the words, the concepts, he associates with each – the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ first, because He is the public face of God, if you like, and through His self-giving we are introduced to the Father's love, the love for the world which prompted God to send His Son in the first place, and through whom we are also given entry into the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, by which I think he means the sharing the Spirit enables us to enjoy in Christ, both with God Himself and with His people.

Each of the phrases of the verse bear careful reflection – try sometime taking time to meditate upon the grace of the Lord Jesus, or time just to immerse yourself in the love of God, or time to reflect upon the avenues that are opened up in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit – but this morning I would like to explore with you what we should be taking hold of as we say these words to one another and what we should be praying for those around us. “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.”

Firstly, let me encourage you to *receive* the blessings that we speak of in these words. They are not just words to repeat – they are much more than that – they are gifts of God for each one of us to enjoy. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ is at the very foundation of our faith – perhaps you have heard the useful little mnemonic g.r.a.c.e - God's riches at Christ's expense. In Paul's words to the Philippians, He who is in very nature God did not consider equality with God something to be grasped but made Himself nothing for our sake, yielding to death, even death on a cross in our place so that we might receive God's pardon for our sins and share in His life everlasting. Not because we deserved God's favour nor because we had

earned it, but while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ is His gift of Himself to us, to you and to me. Have you received that blessing?

The love of God is the atmosphere which we are given to breathe as Christians – and yet so many of us, whether consciously or sub-consciously live under the shadow of a frightening God, a threatening God, a punishing God, a guilt-inducing God, a God that we have made in our own image but who is not the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, revealed for us in the pages of the Old and New Testament. Do you know the love God has for *you*? Have you experienced the love of the Most High?

And the fellowship of the Holy Spirit is the gift of life in all its fulness, the experience of the indwelling presence of God with us and of unity with all God's people that calls forth from deep within us, love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Have you received that blessing? Do you know that God is near you, or does it feel as if He is beyond your reach, unattainable? As you *say* the words of the Grace, may you know for yourself the truths of which the words speak.

And secondly, as you say the Grace at the close of a service or a meeting, may you genuinely *share* those same blessings with those who are around you. There is a thin dividing line that separates the temptation to devote all our energies to our encounter with God, and the temptation to invest our energy to our fellowship with one another. Swinging the pendulum too far one way or the other leads us into error, either to an individualistic faith that removes us from the world to enjoy a sublime experience of the spiritual that is less and less related to the world for which Christ died, or to a purely human interaction that gradually squeezes God out of the picture. Here, the context in which the words of the Grace were first written reminds us of the need to keep the balance, to share the blessings of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit with all people, even with those who have hurt us and ignored us and spoken ill of us, and not to get so caught up with the day to day experience of the church here in this world that we forget that there is an eternal dimension to what we are about. As you say the words of the Grace may you be conscious not only of the blessings you yourself have received and are receiving but also of those with whom you are saying those words, and sharing those blessings. It may not always be easy to have to do with those others with whom we are fellow-members of a

congregation, but it is of the essence of the Christian faith that the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit are for sharing.

Then thirdly and finally, as you say the words of the grace, remember that the blessings that it conveys are for *living* day by day. These words were Paul's parting shot to them in writing but he had very much in mind the fact that in a matter of weeks he would be with them in person. One of the accusations that was cruelly made against Paul was that he said one thing but did another, that he said he would come back once but he actually ended up coming twice; that he wrote to them fiercely and boldly but that face to face he was mild-mannered and gentle. How reassuring it would therefore have been to the Corinthians when his parting words to them in writing turned out to be a taste of the person who would come among them, a man who radiated the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, a man who mirrored the love of God, a man whose chief desire was to draw people into the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. Can the same be said of us? In a moment I am going to invite you to say the words of the grace – will the same characteristics be apparent in us as we chat with one another afterwards? Will the same characteristics be apparent in us to those whom we meet on the way home and those with whom we will have to do during the course of the coming week. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit are for living out.

Receive and share and live out the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. Receive and share and live out the love of God. Receive and share and live out the fellowship of the Holy Spirit.

Let's address these powerful words to one another:

'The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.'