

## Grace

Michaelmas Term, 2016

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## Grace

Michaelmas Term, 2016

9th October, Rev Dr Simon Perry

The theme for Chapel this term will be the biblical notion of Grace. Though Grace lies at the heart of the Christian worldview, attempts to explain it, to name it, to put it into words – though helpful – tend to have the unfortunate effect of domesticating it. The clearest definition of grace is to describe it alongside the notion of Mercy – and in Christian circles it is often said that Grace is getting what you don't deserve, and Mercy is not getting what you do deserve.

The idea behind this is the sixteenth century doctrine that human beings are all miserable and wretched ragamuffins, all deserving of eternal damnation. So Mercy, is being saved for the eternal bliss of the afterlife – and Grace is when nice things happen, and since we are all miserable wretched ragamuffins, none of us deserve anything nice. Grace is getting what you don't deserve, Mercy is not getting what you do deserve. And that does, indeed, unpack one facet of how the Bible speaks about Grace. But there are far more important dimensions to the dynamic of grace, and it is those other aspects of grace that will be addressed by different Guest speakers through the course of the term.

Today's reading was about an incident that occurred to Jesus of Nazareth sometime in the Late 20s. It is essentially the story of what, in all probability, was the most disastrous PR launch in Western history. Jesus pitches up to his home town of Nazareth, he deliberately misquotes a precious sacred text, he claims to be the Messiah, he delivers a sermon more offensive than anything Donald Trump himself could concoct, and finds himself hauled out of town by an infuriated lynch mob! As a whole, this incident is the perfect illustration, of grace...

This is largely because grace, if it is a virtue, is a violent virtue. The most extreme form of violence is widely regarded as the violence arising from grace. Hence the phrase, gratuitous violence. As a father with three teenage boys, (and a relatively tiny but turbo-charged spitfire of a daughter), gratuitous violence is not an uncommon experience. That is, violence that is unprovoked, that comes out of nowhere, for no reason. Violence that irrupts into a perfectly manageable and sensible state of affairs – and causes chaos. Gratuitous violence – is thus the perfect illustration for how grace functions. Grace is unprovoked, and comes out of nowhere for no reason. Grace irrupts into the manageable and peaceable status quo of our experience, and causes chaos.

And that is precisely what happened in the hometown of Jesus some time in the late 20s. In fact, it strictly speaking it wasn't merely Jesus' hometown – it was his Fatherland. In Nazareth, there was a perfectly manageable status quo. It was a town that in recent history had witnessed human atrocity at the hand of Roman occupiers. And it was a town with a naturally high level of patriotism, and nationalism. And then Jesus pitches up at the synagogue.

He reads from the ancient scroll of Isaiah, but changes some of the words – in particular, he mischievously omits the most satisfying climax in which Yahweh will exact vengeance upon Israel's enemies. Now in some translations, people speak well of Jesus because he speaks so graciously. But it could equally be translated, that everyone was offended by him, because he was talking about grace. That is, he is disrupting the status quo by not voicing the need for vengeance against oppressors. And they are confused – and say 'Isn't this the son of Joseph'. Again, this could be expressing delight (because our Jesus – local boy done good), or it could be expressing disdain (he's just one of us – he has nothing to teach us.) In any case, if the crowds are not offended, they soon will be.

Jesus goes on to slam two principle virtues treasured in your Fatherland, or quite literally, your 'Patris.' In his own Patris, Jesus attacks both nationalistic brand of patriotism and of patriarchy. He slams patriarchy by citing how Israel's greatest prophet, at the time of Israel's greatest need, was sent not to help Israel but to help a foreign woman. He slams patriotism by citing Israel's other great mega-prophet – who when Israel had many lepers, was not sent to heal any of them but instead was sent to heal a general in the army of their enemies. In his Patris, Jesus attacks patriotism and he attacks patriarchy. He introduces grace into a status quo that was perfectly happy without it.

It is for this reason some New Testament scholars take it that Jesus not being celebrated by the folk of his fatherland because he spoke so graciously. Instead, they argue, they attempted to execute him precisely because he was talking about grace. In this light, grace was violent. It was intrusive. And people recoiled from it. I'm not sure how you might picture the scene – but in Nazareth it is highly unlikely there were hundreds of men – but maybe 20-30. And by the time they had got Jesus outside and carried him up the hill, they would be getting pretty tired – and they would have exceeded the distance they were permitted to travel on the Sabbath. So whether by divine intervention, insufficient manpower or the gradual loss of enthusiasm, Jesus's ministry was not ended before it had begun.

The point, it seems however, is that throughout the Gospels, irruptions of God's grace are not universally fluffy experiences, not a foretaste of happy eternity of blessings.

Of course grace is celebrated throughout scripture despite its disruptive and its controversial and its potentially traumatic nature.

Of course, grace is something to be celebrated and shared and received with joy. But all too often, in Christian parlance, it becomes a domesticated virtue, robbed of its explosive core. And without the trauma, the disruption, the controversy – then there is nothing amazing about grace.

Throughout the Gospels, Jesus engages in activities where he becomes a channel of divine grace – whether through teaching, through healing, through exorcising demons, or through telling parables. And time after time when people experience the grace he embodies, they are shocked, amazed, taken aback. The normal reaction to grace, it seems, is to recoil in sheer astonishment – and that will be the subject of next week's service.

Today, however, it is enough to claim that Grace is a societal, political, behavioural explosive device.

Grace is more radically disruptive than anything to date that UKIP have done to shake-up British Politics.

More shocking than anything that could be conjured up from Donald Trump's history of outrageously disgusting one-liners.

Grace is even more astounding than when the middle aged-female rapper, Honey G, made it through to the next round of the X Factor.

Grace means much more than getting what you don't deserve. It's a word used by Biblical authors in a desperate and almost futile attempt to cram into a concept something of what happens when human beings experience Divine Otherness at close hand.

## INTERCESSIONS

God of grace, for the everyday blessings we take for granted and think of as ordinary, and for the acts of grace that we encounter as extraordinary, we give you thanks.

For the warmth of friends, the availability of food and water, the advantages of education, we give you thanks.

For the freedom of our decisions, for the gift in every breath we draw, for the blessing of every moment we live, we give you thanks.

We thank you for all that you have made us to be, and pray that by your grace we would grow into who we truly are in your sight,

So that those who hunger and thirst and have no education, might benefit from our abundance.

So that those who live under the darkness of injustice and the yoke of the oppressor might be affected by our worship of you.

So that those who oppress and exploit and trample the poor, might be confronted by your loving grace, and when we are to be found among them, open our eyes.

God of grace, may your welcome disruption, your liberating presence, your astonishing actions be made real through us, to the glory of your name.

## Political Love

Michaelmas Term, 2016

16th October, Rev. Dr Simon Perry

### Grace in the Sermon of Jesus

Have you ever wondered what British values are? (Presuming that the pound is not a measure of British value.) A sixth form college with whom I have links, has recently been criticised by ofsted because it didn't sufficiently exhibit British values. Well, I put it to you that if there are such things as British Values, we can discover what they are by reading them, or perhaps, into - Bible. In particular, the Ten Commandments and the Sermon on the Mount. This sermon is a first century Messianic TED talk and appears in scripture as a series of moral aphorisms that all good Christian folk are expected to display. The so-called Sermon on the Mount, is usually translated as a series of platitudes ripe for Radio's 2 Thought-for-Day.

In the popular mind set, it sound like Jesus was a perfectly sensible English gentlemen from the 1920s, delivering moral guidance for how to be a good egg. Turn the other cheek, love everyone, don't make a show of your generosity. It's all stuff that could just as easily include, hug a hoody, tip a waiter, give money to rough sleepers. These moral aphorisms are widely perceived as the bedrock of traditional British culture and pillars of western ethical goodness. Oh come come, don't be a bad sport - be nice to people, don't cause trouble, go out of your way to be helpful.

Of course the Bible is read as a source of British values. As one elderly Anglican lady once told me, the Bible is just a bunch of quotations from the Book of Common Prayer.

So when we hear the Bible in its context, such well known nuggets of ethical guidance are interpreted into a morality Jesus of Nazareth would not recognise. So the reading today, is from Jesus's sermon – and includes these three well known commandments. The first is turn the other cheek. When someone insults you, offer them the other side of your face and let them insult you a little more. Become a human door mat for abusers. If you feel downtrodden, buckle under, put up with it, grin and bear it, chin up.

First century Palestine was an occupied territory. If a Superior slapped someone in the face, they had to use their right hand, as the left was used for toiletries. Hence, if someone strikes you on your right cheek, with their right hand, they are using the back of their hand. In Roman culture, though, if you slap someone with the palm of your hand rather than the back of your hand, it means you consider them an equal. By turning the other cheek, you are inviting your superior to slap you with the palm of his hand, demanding to be treated as an equal. It is a brilliant form of passive resistance, by radically over-complying with Roman authority.

The same is true of the second command. Under what circumstances might a person take the garments of another? The Jewish legal system entitled creditors to take the coat from the back of their impoverished debtors as a guarantee, though they had to return the garment at night since it doubled as a sleeping garment. The humiliation involved is outlined in Torah (Dt. 24:10-13) and in a context where Roman imperial policy ultimately led to land seizures and countless farmers were reduced to debt, this would have been a scenario all-too-familiar. How are Galilean peasants to respond to this unrelenting assault upon their land, their livelihoods and their dignity? Jesus does not counsel rebellion. Nor does he reaffirm the justice of the Torah and counsel compliance. Again, he calls for

over-compliance, giving to the creditor not only one's outer garment but also the shirt from one's back. This act of defiance, both highlights to everyone present the humiliation to which ruthless Jewish creditors are subjecting their own folk, and in so doing, humiliates the creditors themselves. Again, this is an action that subverts the social hierarchy precisely by obeying it.

The same is true of the third command – going the second mile, which is often taken as a moral injunction to go out of your way to help others. However, in Roman society, a soldier was entitled to commandeer the services of natives to carry their packs for one mile – and on major military routes from Rome to the frontier with the Parthians, there would be a lot of traffic. So by going the second mile, Jewish inhabitants would be subverting Roman authority by saying – no, I am not carrying this pack because of your law, but because of my generosity. It removes the superiority of the Roman occupier, not by disobeying the law but by radically over-complying with it.

What has any of this to do with grace, which after all is the theme for this term? The context is that of loving your enemies. It is sometimes called, The Golden Rule, do unto others as you would have them do to you. Do as you would be done to. Sometimes called the Empathic principle. Jesus, it is often thought, simply endorses this golden rule. The trouble is, Jesus' command to love others is thoroughly radicalised by insisting that those others include your enemies. There is a wealth of ancient literature from multiple cultures that are wheeled out to show Jesus was saying nothing new. There are other text exhorting leaders to show political love to their peers, their allies, to those they have conquered, – but in none of the 20 or so I've read, is there anything demanding that loving others means loving one's enemies.

To do that, is to introduce the destabilising element of grace. Grace, I suggested last week, is unprovoked, comes unexpectedly from beyond, and causes chaos to a status quo that was working perfectly well for me thank you very much. That is precisely how grace functions in Jesus's sermon – and in Luke's version of this sermon he actually uses the word grace. I've paraphrased it slightly, to read

"If you love those who love you,

What does grace mean to you?

For even sinners love those who love them.

If you are good to those who are good to you,

What does grace mean to you?

For even sinners do the same.

If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive,

What does grace mean to you?

Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again.

In first century Palestine, enemies were the distant dictators in Rome, the local Jewish aristocracy who, as collaborators, served as Rome's executive officers, and of course – one's neighbours driven to despair and desperate to survive. This was the social hierarchy Jesus addressed – and rather than counselling rebellion, he counselled radical over compliance to unmask the realities of the injustices that dehumanised countless members of the populace.

Jesus does not counsel outright military rebellion, nor does he suggest everyone just knuckle under. Instead, he urges his listeners to become channels of divine grace – not so that they can become grinaholic religious fruitcakes, but so that liberation is a personal as well as a political reality. His followers are agents of grace – and it is through this bunch of down-to-earth followers sat on a hillside in a politically volatile and economically desperate corner of the earth – that the character of Israel's God is manifested.

It is through them that grace comes, unprovoked, from beyond the system, to introduce liberating chaos into an unjust world. I'm not sure how British that is. British values are not read in, but perhaps read into the Bible. Nothing in the sermon on the Mount belongs in Radio 4's Thought for the Day.

Grace is the ideological earthquake that causes people to question the validity of any and every value system.

Grace is the unexpected irruption of otherness into the familiar, everyday status quo with which we might have been perfectly at ease.

Grace is the repulsive, offensive, intrusive, shocking, liberating and humanising presence of the God of scripture through the human face of real people here and now.

#### Intercessions

Loving God, we thank you for the place you have given us, the breath in our lungs and the time entrusted to us.

We thank you for the friendships that define us, for the enemies who define us no less, for all our neighbours.

We pray for our neighbours here, those near to us, whose lives somehow interweave with ours. Those we know only by their car, their front door, their routines – we pray that you will help us to be good neighbours, agents of grace in the place we live.

We pray for those living on the door step of our college. Those who are hungry and homeless, those who are busy or lonely or empty. Bless them with a taste of your loving presence. Use us as ministers of your kingdom, representing your grace to our neighbours.

We pray for those who, in a globalised world, we may not have considered our neighbour. For children in the Calais jungle, for the terrorised and fearful inhabitants of Aleppo. In a world where those who are distant are not beyond the reach of our action, show us how to be channels of grace and save us from indifference.

We thank you for the community life of our college, for the grace shown to us here and for the opportunities to be channels of grace. May harmonious and caring relations may continue to deepen and flourish as the year progresses. Show us who is our neighbour and help us to love them.

Loving God, who created us to live with our neighbour, show us how to be recreated ever more fully into your image.

Show us who is our neighbour, and show us how to be theirs, to the glory of your name.

## **Topsy Turvey Grace**

**Michaelmas Term, 2016**

**23rd October, Claire Todd**

Ps. 103:6-14

Lk 10:38-end

'If I had a world of my own, everything would be nonsense. Nothing would be what it is, because everything would be what it isn't. And contrary-wise, what it is, it wouldn't be. And what it wouldn't be, it would. You see?' so says the Mad Hatter from that famous classical story, Lewis Carroll's Alice in Wonderland.

We live in a mad world. We live in a world which has become increasingly individualistic, hi-tech, and faster-paced, at least generally in our western world. Nothing new there, except that my children, along with countless others, have never known any other sort of world. But the world hasn't always been like this, and in some parts of the world it still isn't. We all too easily forget that what we do reflects on others, whether that is our family, our friendship circle, our colleagues, our nation even. Each one of us, as well as being an individual, is also part of a community. We tend to think of ourselves as independent, self-sufficient, afraid of being needy, striving to be successful in every possible way. And all in the name of what? An evolving humanity which is heading towards ultimate perfection, including the values and priorities we're encouraged to adopt, whether by the media, advertising, or big companies, who are after all only out to make a profit and not to make your life perfect if you have possession of their latest product, as they would have you believe. And this is where the crux lies.

To live in a world which seeks to draw every last drop of energy, every last drop of work, every last bit of money out of you, and for what? Where is this world really heading?

Society has seen a big increase in people engaging in well-being activities such as yoga and mindfulness to combat stress, along with a spiritual searching independent of any faith or religion. So there is a need to be answered, a thirst to be quenched, which isn't to be found in any modern day inventions. Is it really progress, or do we just delude ourselves? Is everything really as it seems?

One of my favourite children's books is Mr Topsy Turvy. In this book Mr Topsy Turvey as the name suggests sees everything as the opposite, and so often when I read the Bible Mr Topsy Turvey comes to mind. Time and again God turns everything on its head. Challenges our status quo. Shows us that there is a different way to live, different priorities and values to adopt. And that is what God did in sending His son Jesus. Through God's grace, all of a sudden that what is, is not, and that which wasn't, is. And grace demands a response, it's difficult to ignore.

One man that encountered God's grace and responded to it in quite a dramatic way was John Newton, who lived in the 18thC. He was the son of an English shipmaster and would serve on ships, learning what it took to be an officer. But he was very badly behaved, mocked authority and lacked discipline, getting in with the wrong sort of people. His behaviour eventually led to him being flogged and demoted and in his early twenties he ended up in Africa and became a shipmaster in the slave trade. He had no regard for religion and even mocked it, until one fateful night when his ship ran into difficulties on rough seas. He spent the night bailing the water out to keep the ship from sinking but it seemed to be a lost cause. Eventually he was on the verge of giving up, and fell to the deck, pleading something like 'If this won't do, then Lord have mercy on us all'. Of course he didn't deserve God's mercy or grace, and yet God gave it. Those on board survived and John ended up responding to the grace of God which he had once

scorned. Remarkably, he became a clergyman and a composer, writing songs such as 'Amazing Grace' that we sang a couple of weeks ago. And he also went on to influence William Wilberforce, who led the movement to end the slave trade. God works in amazing ways.

In this passage about Martha and Mary we encounter just one instance of how Jesus turns things on their heads. At first sight it seems as if Martha is a bit rattled that Mary gets to chill out whilst she is busy doing all of the work. It's true that this passage over time has been used to encourage people to stop filling their lives with business and never-ending tasks and take time to just be with God, to listen and hear. We don't exactly know what it was that he was saying that was so intriguing that Mary sat enthralled at his feet, and there are a variety of perspectives on what this passage is really all about. Some scholars have likened it to the active versus the contemplative life, with Jesus suggesting to Martha that she is so busy that she is missing what is really important, that of attending to the Kingdom of God.

There are other theologians and biblical scholars who state that it defies the conventions and social rules of the day, as for a woman to be sitting at the feet of a man in this way, and who was not her husband was totally counter-cultural. And it was scandalous. The way Jewish society organised itself included what took place within specific spaces, even in the home, which were divided up and men would meet in a particular room, whilst other rooms, such as the kitchen and other unseen places, were classed as the domain of the women and children. But Jesus doesn't feel uncomfortable with Mary's actions, he doesn't chastise her, chase her out or seem filled with disgust; rather he totally affirms the position she has taken, which is akin to that of the place of a student learning from a rabbi. In his response to Martha he is ratifying Mary's place as a future teacher and preacher of the Kingdom of God. Entirely going against what is acceptable behaviour from a woman.

But let's not make the mistake of thinking this is about women's rights, its much much more than that; it's about the abundant and overflowing love of God which speaks to everyone, and calls everyone into relationship with him. It's about a God who loves each of us unconditionally, and desires a response to that love, freely given. God's grace is in his devotion to each of us. When we let God in, his grace changes us, shapes us, leads us to a life that is altered forever.

Our natural human inclinations are to seek after comfort, stability, and security in the form of wealth, possessions, status, of being established in our careers and communities. But Jesus shows us time and again that the mind of God is a complete reversal of human values and pretensions; not that we shouldn't enjoy these comforts and securities, because we are perhaps better able to help others through having some of these things ourselves. But rather that we shouldn't put undue emphasis and value on them. Because in the end, as so many people across the world unfortunately experience through the collapse of big corporations and companies, through the effects of these early days of Brexit, and through the effects of natural disasters such as hurricanes, flooding, earthquakes, and worse; these worldly things, though important in many respects, are in the end folly. They're not what they are, and they are what they're not. When we look at the atrocities that are still happening in places like Syria, and other war-torn areas around the world, let alone the level of violence and crime in this country, along with the homeless and those who find the necessity to make use of the foodbanks in a rich country like ours, it really brings it home to you what our priorities should really and truly be.

It's not easy to live with at odds with social and cultural norms, or what we have come to regard as norms. And yet God calls Christians to do exactly that. To not only look within ourselves to find that place of mercy and grace, but to be outward-looking, seeking it in others. If the statistics are true, then there are more people than ever before craving meaningful relationships, and seeking some sort of community which will offer them an unconditional

welcome. God only ever wants the best for us, and His love has nothing to do with our human worth, or what we think defines us, or who we or others think we are. God loves us unconditionally.

True and real grace is when God gives us the things we don't deserve, and doesn't give us what we do deserve.

## Sermon on Grace

Michaelmas Term, 2016

30th October 2016. Vittorio Montemaggi

Readings – Habakkuk, 1:1-4; 2:1-4. Luke 19:1-10

Today's sermon, like the rest of the sermons this term, is on the subject of Grace. It is wonderful to be here to speak of this, and I am profoundly grateful for the opportunity, both in itself, and in the way it resonates with two other recent opportunities I had to be in this Chapel reflecting on Grace. A few months ago, my wife and I held a service here with friends and family to offer prayer and thanksgiving for our marriage. The main musical accompaniment to the service was the hymn, Amazing Grace, which we chose especially for its opening words:

Amazing grace! (how sweet the sound)

That sav'd a wretch like me!

I once was lost, but now am found,

Was blind, but now I see.

Then, only a couple of weeks ago, I was here again, together with a number of Robinson Fellows and other distinguished colleagues from the Universities of Cambridge and of Notre Dame, for a colloquium precisely on the subject of Grace. Our gathering, which took the form not just of academic conversation, but also of poetry, music, and theatre, reminded us just how difficult it is to speak of Grace, but also just how wonderfully we can be made aware of it by coming together in communal exploration.

It is, indeed, notoriously difficult to speak of Grace. It might in fact be more accurate to say it is impossible. For how can we speak of that which – by definition – does not belong to us, is given to us, gratuitously, mysteriously, beyond our merit and understanding? How can we speak of the divine mystery by which we are made and constantly made-new – the love which brings us into being out of nothing, and by which our lives, disfigured by sin, are transfigured into union with God?

By the same token, however, one could say that Grace is thereby also the easiest thing to speak. No matter what we speak of, there would simply be no speaking if not for Grace. Our words, as expressions of life, are expressions of Grace – they speak the mysterious and unmerited gift of existence.

This is perhaps particularly true of prayer – like our own, together, this evening, here in Robinson Chapel. For what is prayer if not the conscious recognition, as language, of our being held into being by God, gratuitously, in our praise, in our joy, in our doubts, in our sufferings, in our community? Prayer is human life that articulates itself as gratuitous expression of relationship with that by which we gratuitously have life.

Not all prayer, however, is verbal. Other forms of human communication can indeed constitute prayer and thus be expressions of Grace, in the sense just outlined. Take architecture, for instance: the way human beings communicate their understanding of their existence by consciously shaping the space in which they live and come together. Look

around yourselves. We have the possibility, here at Robinson, of coming together in prayer in a Chapel that can itself be seen as prayer, a conscious articulation, through its definition of space, of our relationship with the mystery in which all space is grounded.

Last time I had the privilege of offering a sermon here in this extraordinary space, a few years ago, was on Trinity Sunday, and in my sermon I tried to reflect on how the very nature of the space we are in could invite us into deeper contemplation of the mystery of the Trinity. Today, I would like to take the space we are in as starting point for reflecting on how our readings this evening invite us to think about Grace.

That the space we are in was designed to get us to think about Grace, is clearly indicated by its main doors. Inscribed on the warmth of their wood are cool, metal ripples, meant to denote the waters of Baptism – our life made new by Grace. To touch that metal, to open those doors, to walk through them, or even simply to walk by them, is to be offered the opportunity of refreshing our awareness of life renewed by divine love.

But it was not this obvious reference to Grace in the architecture of our Chapel that came to mind when reading our readings for today. What came to mind was the stark juxtaposition, the extraordinary conjunction, of brick and stained glass. In particular, what came to mind was the contrast – but also the profound connection – between the solidity of the brick and the fragility of the stained glass, with its lush foliage. The experience of inhabiting this space is powerfully defined by each of these. The brick of the Chapel – especially as it is integrated in the structure of the College as a whole – communicates protection, safety, fortified assuredness; something by which we might receive strength in our doubts and anxieties. The stained glass of the Chapel – especially as it looks out and indeed in its shape reaches out towards the rest of the College – communicates possibility, growth, spiritual confidence; the rich foliage depicted in it is something by which we can thus be nourishingly challenged to recognize that there is always more beauty in the world than we can at any given moment perceive.

Habakkuk speaks of a rampart. Luke speaks of a tree. Our two readings this evening present to us a contrast that the space in which we are reflecting on them can help us appreciate. Habakkuk, the prophet, is beset by injustice, sees worldly disintegration around him, anxiously complains to God, and anxiously waits for God to respond. He tells us he will station himself on the rampart, and wait there for God to speak. When God does speak, he tells him to be prepared for the vision he will have, and to be confident that it will come; even if it might appear delayed, it will arrive just when it has to arrive. “If it seems to tarry, wait for it; it will surely come, it will not delay”.

Habakkuk is distressed by the condition of his world, and he is confident that the Lord will offer guidance. He also knows himself to be a possible point of contact between the two. As prophet, he is part of the world’s fortification against injustice. He is watchful, and waits on the rampart for God’s guidance to manifest itself.

It is not difficult in this Chapel to imagine ramparts. And our world, like Habakkuk’s, is also beset by injustice. In response to this, we might do well to follow the prophet’s example, calling to God from the solidity of a space such as the one we are in, which can itself give strength to our anxieties. We do not know exactly when or how God will answer our call, but we can be confident – however much we might be unable to understand this – that the call will be answered at the appropriate time, and in the appropriate way.

In response to the world’s injustice, we have the responsibility to be open to Grace, and to have the humility and indeed the openness not to think we can fully understand the way it operates. In that lack of understanding, we can

indeed continue to gain strength and mutual support by coming together in prayer, especially as encouraged to do so by a space such as the one in which we are coming together in prayer this evening.

Luke tells the story of Zaccheus. Zaccheus is no prophet. He is a rich, chief tax collector – who hears Jesus is in town, and wants to see who he is. Given his short stature (with which I must confess I identify), Zaccheus is unable to see through the crowd, so he climbs up a tree. When Jesus arrives, he sees and calls Zaccheus, telling him he will be staying with him. Zaccheus joyfully accepts and vows to offer his riches to those in need and to those he has wronged. Others in the crowd are appalled by this, because of Zaccheus' morally dubious reputation, but the story ends with the important reminder that "the Son of Man came to seek out and save the lost".

The text does not specify exactly why Zaccheus wants to see who Jesus is: it simply says he wants to see him. But then, when Jesus arrives, it is not in fact Zaccheus who sees Jesus, but Jesus who sees Zaccheus, and calls him, and chooses him as his host, thereby granting him salvation.

With the foliage of its stained glass, it is not difficult in this Chapel to imagine trees. And our life, like that of Zaccheus, is often characterized by strong but undefined desire. We know we want something, and we want it fervently, but we are not sure exactly what it is that we want. Very often, like Zaccheus, we place our desire too firmly on earthly things or riches that cannot fulfil it. In response to this, we might do well to try and follow Zaccheus' example, from the fragility of a space such as the one we are in, and spontaneously reach out to God, even if we are not able really to understand that that is actually what we are doing.

In response to our inner, most intimate, and often most undefined yearnings, we have the responsibility to be open to Grace, and to have the humility and indeed the openness to recognize that ultimately it is not we who can seek Grace out. It can only be the other way round.

The first time I had the privilege of offering a sermon in this extraordinary Chapel, it was part of a series on humour and laughter. What I did on that occasion was reflect on the art of Italian comedian Roberto Benigni. So I was intrigued to see, in preparing the present sermon, that Benigni himself had recently spoken of the story of Zaccheus. He did so as part of a panel discussion at the Vatican on Pope Francis' book *The Name of God Is Mercy*. His emphasis was on the joyfully comic nature of the story, the salvifically ironic disproportion between Zaccheus' actions and Jesus' response. This short, rich, and self-centered man climbs up a tree simply because he wants to see who Jesus is, and in return is offered nothing less than salvation. Whether on any given day we feel more like Habakkuk or more like Zaccheus, we always have a responsibility to be open to Grace. Whether in response to the world's injustice, or as expression of our innermost yearnings, we have a responsibility to be receptive to how we might be called by God. We also have a responsibility not to presume to know exactly what that might look like. In a space such as the one we are praying in together this evening, however, we have the blessing of being reminded, that this unknowing is already in itself Grace: the unmerited gift of being open to that which, beyond our understanding, will be offered us for our salvation.

So, whether we prefer climbing ramparts or tress, whether we feel more comfortable in the assuredness of fortification or the spontaneity of vegetation, let us gratefully be open to how Grace will continue to seek us out, in this space and beyond, so as to change us for the better.

## Sermon: Remembrance Day

Professor Robin Kirkpatrick

13th November, 2016

This is the evening of Remembrance Day, And so I want to talk about Death; and I want to talk about Sin. Sin is violence. It is the violence of high explosives, of well-aimed sniper-fire and the computerised viciousness of unmanned drones. War harnesses the capacity for violence that exists in all individuals, even in those who know they must repress the impulse to squash a mosquito. . But it also stands as a metaphor for at least two other kinds of violence. One such is our unwitting and unwilling involvement in the spider-webs of exploitation, environmental irresponsibility or acquiescence in the buying of Thailand prawns and tee-shirts produced by slave-labour.

We should perhaps call this Original Sin. We see the good but, like it or not, we do the worst, communally as well as individually. And one must quickly admit that the Church itself, or its institutional offices, has never been free from this arachnoid taint.

Or else there is tragic violence, where there seems to be no alternative save to meet force with force, even at the risk of being horribly mistaken about what is right and what is wrong. And then there is Death. This is the ultimate threat, the ultimate gun-slinger solution. Or is there more to be said about death? Don't death and mourning, too, in recognition of loss, bring us to the sharpest sense of all that we value or love in life – the beauty, the goodness, the irreplaceability of each mortal creature? In that light, this evening's subject may not be as unrelievedly sombre as at first it may appear.

Now, I say that I'll talk 'about' sin and death. But that word 'about' is already mistaken. These are not merely topics for learned discussion, inviting some kind of scholarly analysis. There is, of course, a fancy academic word for all of this: eschatology, concerning the ultimate realities in the light of Divine Judgement. .But there is something silly about any Ology in this regard. (Just imagine the CV entry: 'I was awarded a high 2: 2 in Eschatology at the University of ... X.')

The realities I'm speaking of are, truly, everyday realities. Sin is the grit beneath every step we take; and death is the diesel-fume that clutches at the throat. So perhaps the only people who should speak on Remembrance Day are military personnel who know these everyday realities, painfully, at first hand. Indeed, it is often – though not invariably – the case that soldiers speak with more impressive clarity about war than any of us who have never held a gun could ever do. I've heard these people say – convincingly – that no one hates war more profoundly than those who have fought in wars. Only these will know what wounds and mutilation are really like, or else what it really means to order the dropping of an incendiary device or a barrel bomb. Likewise, I have heard tell of morally agonising cases where a man who, on Sunday evening had been kicking the hell out of some supposed terrorist, went forward on Monday to die heroically in defence of his platoon – and perhaps should still, despite yesterday's cruelty, be considered a hero.

Some of these appalling complications are caught in the words (on the handout) of the scarcely-remembered war-poet, Captain Charles Sorely, who died in 1915 at the Battle of Loos. He was twenty years of age.

When you see millions of the mouthless dead

Across your dream in pale battalions go,

Say not soft things as other men have said,

That you'll remember. For you need not so ...

Say only this, 'They are dead.'

This evening, however, I shall ask – not at all knowing the answer – what the Christian Church has to offer in this perspective. And, remembering Sorely throughout, I'll hope to avoid any 'soft answers'. I am aware that the theme of this term's sermons is Grace. I also know that we can no more define grace than we can be, merely, academic about the realities of sin and death. If sin and death are grit and diesel fumes, then grace is the air we breathe and the water in which we wash. Grace is God's love for God's creatures, calling us to live again in those fruitful and free relationships that, otherwise, we so easily violate. One might add that our awareness of what good is is often expressed, certainly, in consolation but, equally, is refreshed by surprise and delight, or stimulated by art, as, for example, this evening, in the music of Faure's Requiem. For all that, grace can also be as stupendous as a roadside bomb. (Think of St Paul on the way to Damascus.) So, speaking of grace, one needs to avoid any suggestion of 'soft words, and likewise – following the theologian, martyr and saint, Dietrich Bonhoeffer – to be on guard against any suggestion of 'cheap' grace.

This, I think, is why the words of Job in the first reading are appropriate to Remembrance Day. (In fact, these verses, until recently, formed a regular part of the funeral ceremony.) Job was a prosperous man and, at the same time, innocent and righteous. Yet, unaccountably, he loses everything that he properly possessed and finds himself living as a refugee or scavenger on a dung-heap. Comforters come to visit him, suggesting among other things that he must have done something wrong to deserve all of this, and that he should, therefore, reconcile himself to the will of God. Yet this comfort is greeted as 'soft' and 'cheap'. Job himself vehemently rejects any such call to abject penitence or any fatalistic submission to a mysteriously transcendent power. The words you have heard express outrage at the violence he is suffering and anger at the thought of divine vindictiveness. Addressing God directly, he cries out 'Why should you oppress me and treat me with contempt?' 'Aren't you an eternal being? Why then behave like some bully in the mortal playground?'

But then God speaks to Job directly. These words are not delivered through a sanctimonious intermediary, and they offer neither moral justification nor tea and sympathy. The God of Job speaks from the very heart of a hurricane, from an apparently destructive swirl that might speak of tragic contradiction, or even of sin and death. This vortex, however, is power not in the sense of violence but of free if incomprehensible creation – a truly stupendous manifestation of art – as when in Genesis life was born out of absolute nothingness – demanding that we live ... and live again: Gird up your loins. Pull yourself together, man. For I will now demand of thee, and answer thou me. Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? [Where were you] when the morning stars danced together and sang for joy?

Job has declared, as early as Chapter 9; 'I know that my redeemer liveth'. This phrase is familiar from Handel's lovely – and gracious – setting, so often played as a smooth classic on Classic FM. But for Job our redeemer is also our creator. And this conclusion is confirmed and developed by the second reading, from St Mark's Gospel 4: 35. Here, as in Job – and indeed in Genesis and at Pentecost – there is a wind moving over chaos. And then, through the storm, there is the voice of Christ, awakening. His words, demanding faith, speak as vehemently as Jehovah's did to Job. More often, perhaps, than we care to admit, Christ does speak in anger. He is, after all, our ultimate Judge. But above all, he is our Creator. And the faith that he demands of his disciples is that, like Job, we should live through the inconceivable storm of creative life, even through the violence of the Cross, and awake to a redemption which is also, as Job's words prophesy, the Resurrection. Nor is Resurrection to be understood merely as resuscitation or cryonic revival. It is re-creation: Creation – ex nihilo, miraculously – anew.

Remembrance Day: I am now six minutes from the end of an address which has been as difficult to write as it must have been to listen to. And I do, finally, want to modulate from a minor to a major key, hoping and believing that grit and diesel fumes may be cleansed – or even transubstantiated – in the grace and love entrusted to the Church. Yet this conclusion will present difficulties of its own, since grace and love are themselves absolute mysteries.

Remembrance doesn't mean simply – or 'softly' – elegiac nostalgia. Rather, it means re-member-ing, putting back together the limbs – or members – of a shattered body. And there are certain festivals in the calendar of the Church – and also certain lines in the hymns we are singing tonight – which invite us to speak, through faith and hope, of love as the essential element in all our existence.

November, leading up to Advent, is the month when we remember the dead. This season is inaugurated on November 2nd by the feast of All Souls. And the significant word here is 'All' – as it is likewise in the hymn 'All people that on earth do dwell'. This feast reminds us that all humanity was created to breathe, eat and drink as one. So 'Adam' signifies the whole unity of human creation. This unity was violated by the Fall. But Christ, as the Second Adam, ensured that, participating in his Incarnate Body, all may – and indeed will – recover our primal unity. We pray for the dead. The dead pray for the living. And here again 'All' must mean 'All'. No One is complete until restored to relationship with every other One. Of course, there are difficulties in that proposition. What – one might ask – about Genghis Khan, or Hitler or Bashar al-Assad? Are they to be included in the All and One? Well, I think they are. Heaven knows how, literally. Or better, and less vaguely, one should look, not to Heaven, but to the Resurrection at the end of time – when, with that New Creation, the divisiveness of sin will yield to unity – or, again, better, caritas – as realised in the body of Christ. And here the handout may suggest how possible and how needful that reality is. Page Two shows cave paintings produced some 30 or 40,000 years ago. Yet they are immediately recognisable as human hands doing human things – raised in supplication or agony or dance. And perhaps the most human thing about them is the skill with which they were produced – by spitting pigment from the lips onto outstretched fingers. Breath, taste and artistic pride all conspire to reflect what it means – and always has meant – to be truly human. And the most remarkable thing is that the single hand was painted in Borneo and the communal hands in Argentina. There can hardly be a question here of influence. These paintings, resonating beyond geographical or temporal contact, are an expression of pure, radical humanity, And one prays at All Souls that our hands can be joined with all hands like these.

I'll conclude with a prayer that is spoken after communion on another November Feast Day. November 11th is not only Armistice Day. It is also the Feast Day of Saint Martin of Tours. And who was Saint Martin? Well, he was an Hungarian officer in the Roman heavy cavalry – or, so to speak, tank regiment – in the decades when Rome had first converted to Christianity. And when he left the army he became a French bishop. This, briefly, leads us back to the violence and tragic contradictions with which we began. For by the 19th century, St Martin had become something of a mascot for the French military machine – as if there were, absurdly, any religious sense to saying that God and the Saints are on our side in battle. Incidentally, something of the same contradiction arises in singing – as we have done tonight – the hymn Cwm Rhondda. This hymn, if you are a rugby supporter, can sound like a pugnacious invitation for God to enter the scrum on behalf of the Welsh. Yet the rousing phrase 'Bread of Heaven' acknowledges that – in common with the Israelite refugees of the Old Testament – we are wholly dependent on Manna in the desert, as, likewise, we are dependent, here and now, on the Eucharist, which is the memorial feast that prefigures and promotes the communion of all the saints.

And so we come back to the prayer, as offered at St Martin's Mass. In the legend (pictured on the handout by El Greco) St Martin takes his sword and cuts his cloak in two so as to give half to a beggar he has come across. Why not give him the whole cloak? Well, surely because halving implies a sharing hand-to-hand of the goods we have. St Martin is in fact the patron saint of beggars; and on the night after his gift he dreamed of Christ himself wearing the half-cloak he had offered. So El Greco depicts the two young men across the divide as being almost identical twins. It

follows that, in the communion prayer for St Martin's day, the emphasis falls on the offering that we make, all as one, as creatures to our Creator. That offering – as in this evening's closing hymn – is praise for the inextinguishable happiness, even – or perhaps especially – in war, of existing all:

Lord, you have renewed us with the sacrament of unity; help us to follow your will in all that we do. As St Martin gave himself completely to your service, may we rejoice in belonging to you.

Remembrance Sunday 2016

## Goodness Gracious

20th November, Professor Morna Hooker

'I come to this moment, deeply humbled, grateful to God for his amazing grace.'

If the words seem familiar, it is because they were spoken by Mike Pence, Vice-President Elect of the United States, in the early hours of November 9th, when he claimed victory for his running-mate, Donald Trump. I, for one, found them deeply offensive. That the result of the presidential election was amazing, we can surely all agree, for it was undoubtedly unexpected. And most of us would probably accept the hidden assumption that the Republican victory was undeserved. But the suggestion that it was due to the grace of God seemed to me to border on blasphemy. During the last ten days I have heard many explanations as to how it was that Donald Trump won, but I have heard no-one else suggest that it was due to the grace of God.

But I suppose I should not be surprised to find Mike Pence, a devout Conservative Evangelical, claiming to have God on his side. After all, he is doing precisely what those engaged in conflicts have done throughout the ages, whether the battle has been one fought with bullets or with ballot-boxes. Take, for example, the constant appeals of Israel in the Old Testament to their god to save them, and their gratitude when he apparently gave them victory. And what, we may ask, of their enemies? Were they, too, not praying for victory? No doubt the Israelites would have retorted that they were appealing to the wrong god – to a false god. Those of you who have ever sung in Mendelssohn's *Elijah* know how, with increasing desperation, the chorus appeals to Baal to save them, while Elijah mocks them. And when his prayers are answered, that is taken as a sign that his god is the true God. When Israel was triumphant in battle, that was a sign that their god was greater, stronger than all others. With God to back them, they were naturally victorious – and if they weren't, that was because they had offended him, and he was chastising them. But God was not only gracious, but merciful, and would forgive them, and give them victory in the future. So they thanked God for his amazing grace.

In later times, things became more complex, however, since the spread of Christianity throughout Europe meant that opposing armies were apparently appealing to the same god. A protestant god or a catholic god, perhaps, but the same god, nevertheless – and undoubtedly claimed as the champion of either side. 'Cry "God for Harry, England, and Saint George!"' shouted Henry V – or so, at least, William Shakespeare would have us believe – and his opponents would have responded in a similar vein. Human arrogance assumes that God is on our side, because we envisage God in our own image. Countless memorials to those who died in the carnage of the First World War are headed 'to the Glory of God', when they might more accurately be inscribed as memorials to the selfish ambitions and schemings of political leaders. And the victors gave thanks to God for his grace in granting them victory. But have they perhaps not fundamentally misunderstood the meaning of God's grace?

So what is grace? Our English word comes from the Latin *gratia*, which means not only 'graciousness' and 'gift' but 'gratitude', 'thankfulness', as well – which is why we 'say' grace – or give thanks – before a meal. It's similar in meaning to the Greek word *charis*, which also has the double meaning of generous giving on the one hand and receiving with gratitude on the other. Someone who has grace is said to be charming, elegant, attractive, and to be in good favour with others; to be graceless on the other hand, is to lack these qualities. Not surprisingly, Adam and Eve are described as having fallen from grace when they disobeyed God's commandment. Grace is demonstrated in generosity, and in concern for others. This seems a long way from the assumption that grace is demonstrated in strength, in power, and in defeating one's opponents, and so being enabled to impose one's own beliefs and rule on others.

Certainly, our readings tonight offered a very different understanding of grace from the one assumed in Mike Pence's victory speech. Our short reading from Exodus was taken from the story of how God gave Moses the two tablets of the Law, setting out the Ten commandments. Moses asks to see God's glory, but that glory is too powerful for him to bear; exposure to this kind of radiation would burn him up and blind him. Since he has neither protective clothing nor goggles, he's allowed only to catch a glimpse of God as he disappears round the mountain. But even that fleeting glimpse tells Moses something about the nature of God. If we had read a little further we would have heard how he hears God explain that he is gracious and merciful, faithful and true. These are the fundamental characteristics of God. So when the Bible speak of the grace of God, this is what is meant.

God is gracious. Goodness gracious! Is that once common exclamation simply a way in which people reminded themselves of the grace of God – another way of saying 'God is gracious'? 'Goodness', after all, is another term used to speak about God – which is why we have the parallel phrase 'thank goodness'. One on-line site informed me that the words 'Goodness gracious' are generally used to express 'surprise, dismay, or alarm' – which would justify the explanation that they really mean 'God grace – or help – me' – in other words, please get me out of this hole. Another site told me that the phrase 'goodness gracious' is used a lot by 'sweet little old ladies' – surely a dying breed. The young, of course, prefer to use the expression 'oh my god!', which is apparently the modern equivalent of the phrase – though this version is certainly unlikely to be much used by sweet little old ladies.

'Goodness gracious' sums up, then, what Moses learned on Sinai – and the author of John's Gospel clearly had that story of Moses in mind when he wrote in our second reading about no-one ever having seen God. Moses had been told that he couldn't see God – but Christ, declares the evangelist, has seen him face to face;

he knows, therefore, what God is life – indeed, he embodies the characteristics of God. That is why he is full of grace and truth. The idea is so important for John that he repeats it: grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. In him, we have seen what God is like. And then he continues: through him we have all received grace upon grace. Recipients of grace. But what are we, as recipients of grace, to do?

St Paul gives an answer to that question in our final reading, from 2 Corinthians.

Paul is engaged in a difficult task: he is fund-raising. Christians in Jerusalem are having a hard time, and Paul is collecting from the Gentile churches he has founded for his relief fund. Then, as now, fund-raising was no easy task, and he has to use all the arguments he can think of. Think of the grace given to the Macedonian churches, he urges the Corinthians; poor though they are, they have contributed to the fund – and they are bubbling over with happiness that they have been able to do so. Come on then – you Corinthians are surely not going to be left behind! Keep up with the Macedonians! You who are so rich in so many ways, and who claim to have such faith and wisdom – you will surely prove yourselves as lavish in your generosity as your fellow-Christians. And then he pulls out his trump card. Think of the generosity of our Lord Jesus Christ, he tells them. He was rich, yet became poor for your sake, in order that, through his generosity, you might become rich. The Son of God was born and lived as a humble man – he gave everything for your sake; how can you not do the same?

The word 'generosity' which is used here is in fact a translation of the Greek word *charis*, grace. Remember the generosity – the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, says Paul. And how are they to remember it? Why, by following his example, though in a very minor way. If he could abandon riches for poverty, you can surely dig your hands into your pockets and put something in the collection. To ignore Paul's plea would, in effect, be to turn their backs on their newly-found faith, and to say that they placed no value on Christ's sacrifice. Those who claim to follow him must surely follow his example and do something for their fellow Christians.

Through Christ, says St John, we have all received grace upon grace. We are recipients of grace. St Paul draws the logical conclusion: as recipients of grace, we are expected to pass it on. I can imagine him addressing us in this chapel today, in the words he used in writing to the Corinthians: 'You are so rich in everything – in faith, speech, knowledge and eagerness of every kind, as well as in love; you should surely show yourself equally lavish in generous service'. That's what grace is about. Share what you have with others; don't seek your own advantage, but the well-being of others. You have received grace – gifts – be grateful and graceful – generous to others. His message is as appropriate to us today as it was in Corinth in the first century. But I can also imagine Paul using those words of Mike Pence with which we began, for he, too, might well have said: 'I come to this moment, deeply humbled, grateful to God for his amazing grace.' But in his mouth, how very different they sound; and what a different message they convey!

## **Caesar and Trump, Barabbas and Castro**

**Rev Dr Simon Perry**

**Advent Service, 27th November, 2016**

For many Christians, Christmas is the season of tenuous homiletical connections.

The Christmas readings from scripture, tend to fall under the context of a particular type of power – that wielded by the emperor. Here are one historian's descriptions, of a Roman emperor whose actions destroyed the status quo of the Republic. I wonder – if you might be able to make some connections of your own?

Nothing was sacred to him. The more audacious his behaviour, the more the public loved him for it.

What his critics failed to realise, is that he was smart, determined, and very much in touch with the frustrations of the common people.

The ruling classes stood by dazed and helpless as control of the state they had run for centuries slipped from their hands.

At the time when Jesus was born, most people in Galilee were Just About Managing. And they wanted justice, liberation from the unassailable might of the empire. A messiah was usually thought to be the kind of person who would initiate resistance against insurmountable odds, to bring freedom for his people. I hope you're listening out for other connections here: a leader who would inspire the people, take up arms against an undefeatable oppressor, fight a guerrilla war and use violence because it was necessary, and somehow win lasting independence for his people.

At the time of Jesus' birth – there were oppressors and there were resistance movements. Power and resistance to power. No alternative. Brute force, and violent resistance. No alternative.

Until the birth who is both a Saviour (a title for a Roman emperor) and Christ (a title for a resistance leader). But Jesus was neither. He rejected both power and anti-power. All he embodied was grace.

The sermons throughout this term have addressed the theme of grace. Whatever else we might want to say about grace – in biblical terms it is a force that irrupts into the world from utterly beyond, it disturbs and it liberates, it repels and it transforms. Grace, finally, is what happens when divine otherness has an actual, real-life impact upon the concrete actualities of the here and now. To celebrate Christmas, is to brace for the impact of genuine grace.