

SERMON: 22 APRIL 2018 – Rev Alistair Cowper

“GRACE, UNITY, THANKSGIVING AND BLESSING” (John 15:1-8)

“My grace is sufficient for you”. Those words of God to the apostle Paul are recorded in his second letter to the Corinthians (12:9). In effect, God is saying to all of us, his grace is all we ever need.

If I were to think of a word that summed up our time in Stirling or at the beginning of ministry with KNEC, I can't think of a better word than grace, God's undeserved favour. For it has been grace upon grace that I have experienced on a daily basis.

When I hear the word grace, I automatically think of people I know who have that name. We are good friends with the mum of twins, Grace and Emily, or our son Iain's girlfriend, Grace, for example.

But there have been occasions when I've been helped to understand what grace means, not least in reading the Gospels and seeing grace being the very character of Christ, and how Jesus went around leaving traces of grace like a sweet smelling aroma which clung to people's lives as a result of knowing him.

Some of you might be familiar with a story that Tony Campolo tells in his book, *The Kingdom of God is a Party*.

(The story of Agnes and the party for prostitutes).

Campolo sums up this story by telling us that if there existed a church that welcomed and celebrated people like Agnes then Harry, the cafe owner, would want to belong to it. Harry had never heard of such a church before. Campolo argues that it's exactly this kind of church that Jesus came to create, a church willing to throw parties for prostitutes, because Jesus came to bring celebration to those who are beaten down. He calls his followers to be the agents of God who bring loving and joyful things to a world devoid of love and joy.

For me, that story is filled with the aroma of Christ and powerfully explains something of what grace means in a way that ordinary people can relate to.

A few from our Stirling congregation recently attended a *Women in Faith* weekend and were given a wee book by Helen Roseveare, called *Count it all Joy* (86). Helen died a couple of years ago. She had worked as a doctor in Congo for 20 years. But there's a wee story in her book where she tells of meeting a group of women all of whom had a male relative who was in prison and she was asked to speak to these women as part of a Christian Prison Fellowship outreach. She was unsure of what to speak about but felt drawn to that verse 'my grace is sufficient for you'. They had a nice lunch and then began to try to engage a conversation with the women but it wasn't easy. So she prayed and the Lord reassured her that this was indeed the right thing to speak about. She was using something called flannel graph and when she came to put the verse up she replaced the words 'my grace' with 'Jesus', so it read, Jesus is sufficient for you. She then went on to explain that whatever heartache or fear, Jesus is able to meet it and give them the courage to face what lies ahead.

As she spoke she could see it was exactly the right word to share and it led to the women opening up and each speaking freely about their own heartache, allowing Jesus to bring his quiet assurance and peace even in the midst of the turmoil. That too, for me, is grace.

Grace appears in the Bible over 150 times. In the Old Testament it is mostly in the context of people *finding* grace, for example, in Genesis 6:8, *but Noah found grace in the eyes of the Lord*. It's the Hebrew word, *Khan*, from which comes the land of Canaan, the promised land of grace, the place to rest and dwell, to pitch your tent, the place of kindness.

In the New Testament it's nearly always associated with Jesus, as in *the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ*. It's the Greek word *charis*, from which we get charismatic, and means to be full of cheer as a result of divine influence upon the heart.

Grace is the source of all blessing. It's the springboard to usher in the reign of God. And in the grace of our Lord Jesus, the Vine, we can together find the unity that is necessary to go forward, the unity that Jesus speaks about later in John's Gospel (chapter 17), that all of us may be one, and just as God the Father is in Jesus the Son, and Jesus is in the Father, so may we be in them, in order that the world may believe that God has sent his Son into the world as Saviour. And our right response to all of this will be thankfulness. And the result will be fruitfulness or blessing.

So how can we apply this word to our own lives? How can we respond? Is it to want to rest in the grace of God? Is it to resolve to be intentionally thankful each day? Is it to reach out in unity to demonstrate that you are willing to be one with someone you're currently distant from? Is it to look at fruitfulness and ask yourself, which fruit of the Spirit do I need at the moment? Is it love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, humility, or self-control? Where God do I need you to prune me so that that fruit can grow?

Risen Lord,

You have told us that we can do nothing without you. Help us to so remain in Christ, that the fruits of your Spirit would bring blessing to this world in which we live. Prune me where I need to change and bring the reign of God ever closer. In the name of Jesus I pray. Amen.