

“God’s Grace is for All” ó Rom. 11: 1 - 2a, 29 ó 32; JGMC 14/08/11

The good news, in fact the *wonderful* news, is that God’s Grace is for *All*. The bad news, the really *tragic* news, is that God’s Grace is *not* for all. And a third twist on this morning’s theme is that, for most of us, in some situations we’d like to ignore that good news, that God’s Grace *is* for All.

Let’s deal with the third twist first, our Jonah tendency. When we hear of one man systematically shooting to death 70 unarmed children at a camp in Norway and then calmly surrendering to the police as soon as they arrive, I doubt many of us react by thinking: –at least now he will have a chance to repent and receive God’s grace! And it doesn’t have to be so extreme. Then there may be that person who has repeatedly deceived you to the extent that you feel there is no saving that person. And sadly, someone dear to you can *so* let you down, that you slam your arms folded across your chest and say –*that’s it!* That is unforgivable! We can be so let down and embarrassed by some lapse by a family member that we cannot see how desperate that person is for our grace and forgiveness, to help ease their subsequent remorse and self-recrimination. Truly it is good that our ways are not God’s ways! Or His arms would be shut across His chest permanently! Instead, the good news is that He runs to embrace *us* when we turn to Him - no matter *how* messy and dirty we think we have become. However, because Christ calls us to follow Him, it means that He expects us also to be the instrument of grace by which God reaches out to start healing that remorseful person. Indeed, like the prodigal’s brother, we are often called to be instruments of that grace in our own families. And *young people*, Jesus calls *you* also to do this. If your mother or father has been –preaching to you all your life not to do this and that because it is not right, not what Jesus would want you to do, then you find out they have slipped up and done the very same things, don’t throw those teachings out the window. Remember it was not your parents who came up with what is right or wrong in God’s sight; and as Jesus said to St. Peter, *you* must follow *Jesus*; it’s not about what others are doing. And because of this, not only must you refrain from doing wrong regardless of who else has done it, but you must also now be instruments of God’s grace toward that person who has let you down and is now full of remorse. You must be for them an instrument of the peace of Christ who taught us to pray ‘ –forgive me – as I forgive others’. Jesus meant exactly what He said - and is now depending on *you* to do what He has taught us it is right to do.

–God’s Grace *is* for *All* – so proclaims today’s theme. And so conclude St. Paul’s words to the Romans which we read today, God wants to – have mercy on them *all*. – And that is what –grace– is all about; we stand in need of *mercy* from God and He graciously makes it available to all of us, even though the reason we need it is because we have disobeyed Him and so do not *deserve* His help, His forgiveness. That is grace. And I think all of us in Church recognise how good it is that God in His Grace extends mercy to us in the little things and the big things of this life – as well as in the face of inevitable death and what lies beyond. So we count our blessings and we find them countless; we’re truly blessed! Even when everything is not as good as we would like it to be, we name our blessings one by one, then we think of a few more, and we are truly grateful to God that things are not as bad as they could be.

And when they become worse we *still know* that God's mercy can carry us to where we want to get. And so we join with St. Paul in being thankful for God's grace, His ultimate grace, salvation.

But, like me, you may have found our passage a bit complicated; and Paul's reasoning might challenge us. For in that same concluding verse, 32, Paul has said, "For God *has bound* all men over to *disobedience*, so He may have mercy on them." Even the writer of Second Peter said that Paul's letters can be difficult to understand! So it is not surprising that when a few verses are extracted for us to read on their own, we can have questions. One thing I always tell anyone in discussing a point made by St. Paul is *í* you really have to consider what *else* he has said, as it can be dangerous to just take a good sound bite out of one of his letters and quote it. And so it is with our passage today. In fact, commentators on the Book of Romans tell us that even the whole of Chapter 11 cannot be viewed in isolation, we need to read at least Chapters 9 *ó* 11 together! In these Paul deals with an obvious question, why did Israel reject Christ if they were God's chosen people, since Paul and the other Christians were then saying, as Jesus Himself said, that the only way to God was by receiving Christ? The question weighed on Paul, an Israelite who could trace his ancestry through the tribe of Benjamin right back to Abraham.

We did not read Paul's explanation on that question except that in verses 29 *ó* 32 he alluded to the disobedience of the Jews. But we might find verse 32 puzzling, given our view of God in Christ *calling* all people to *obey* Him and follow Him, as Israel was called repeatedly in the OT. Yet this indicates that the reason the Jews have been "disobedient" to God was because *God* had bound everyone, Jews *and* Gentiles, over to disobedience, though Paul adds that this is only so God in His love can then have mercy on us *ó*all. Hmm. Taken by itself, that can be hard for us to accept. Even when we read the rest of Chapters 9, 10 and 11, there are other explanations given by him of why Israel had not accepted Christ that on their own can be difficult for us. In 9: 18 he says, developing on Old Testament passages, "Therefore God has mercy on whom He wants to have mercy and He hardens whom He wants to harden." Then continues with his familiar analogy of God and humans being like the potter taking the clay and making some things for noble purposes and some for not so noble. Some Biblical commentators say they wish Paul had never said that! For that analogy would seem to paint God as a tyrant who acts arbitrarily, not a loving Father who *always* acts toward us with righteousness, justice, and love. And we understand that these characteristics *steadfastly* govern God's actions, even though He does have the sovereign power to do whatever He should choose to do.

Thankfully, at the end of Chapter 9 Paul emphasises that the *reason* Israel did not attain righteousness was because they did not pursue it "by faith". Instead, he argues, they tried to do it on their own, by trying to be righteous in everything they did, rather than trusting in God, in faith. And that was impossible. We're now back on familiar Christian ground! Not a picture of a God who, like a potter, decides today I will make some people who will reject me, by making them deaf to all I have said, and hardhearted and disobedient toward me. Then they will get into all kinds of troubles and despair, never be able to get to heaven when they die in that state, etc., and when the survivors are really remorseful about their fate, I will step in and show them my grace by being merciful to them.

Our God is *not* arbitrary; He *can* do anything and we do not always understand what is happening, but our God by His very nature is always *righteous* and *just*. I can better understand the scenario this way: Everything works in an order established by God. There are always two choices in front of us. Those who choose to have faith in Christ will obey Him and that will take them in one direction, where God wants us to go. Those who choose *not* to have faith in God, will go in the opposite direction. Having turned their back on God, they will not see Him and His goodness at work all around us, will not understand the truth of His teachings and so will not obey them; their hearts will therefore be hardened toward any suggestion about God and what it means to love others. Consequently, people who make that choice will sin rampantly and knowingly, because they do not believe in God, Whom they do not recognise. I see all the time (and will use an actual example later) that people who do not believe in God see things very differently from those who believe in God in Christ.

But Paul reassures us that God is patient. As we read, he said that as far as *Israel* is concerned, God's gifts and call to them as His chosen people were irrevocable. In the verses between 2 and 29, which we did not read, Paul has explained that while the Israelites as a national people may be currently *rejected* in truth there was still a remnant of Jews, like Paul himself, who had *not* been rejected by God. A remnant *chosen* by grace, he says *because* they had put their faith in God by accepting salvation through Christ. In the history of Israel, there was always a remnant, who kept that crucial faith in God, even when the vast majority of the nation had slid away from Him, from His precepts, and were suffering the resultant sin that kept them outside of God's Kingdom. But because of God's unchanging grace, that national majority will still have another opportunity, as a result, we read, of God's mercy to the Gentiles. William Barclay translates verse 31 more clearly as, *so [Israel] will enter into the same mercy as you [gentiles] have now found, meaning -by God's mercy through Christ which had in general been more readily accepted by the non-Jews than by the Jewish nation.* Commentators say that Paul's point is that even if it takes till the Second Coming of Christ for this to happen, it *will* happen; and it will happen the same way as it happened for the *believing* Gentiles, *by receiving Christ*.

It is essential, however, that we note very carefully that Paul's reassurance of ultimate salvation for Israel because of God remaining true to his original call to them as His chosen people, is speaking of Israel as a *people*. It is not about *individuals* choosing or not choosing to accept Christ. The remnant like Paul at that time had *individually* chosen to accept Christ and so had *not* been rejected by God, as was the case, Paul said, for the *nation*. Let no one read more than is really meant into the words of Paul we read today or into today's theme. God's grace, God's ultimate grace, Salvation, that greatest act of *mercy* that Paul termed it, is *available* to all. *í* But not all of us will experience it. Jesus Himself made that very clear. The Good News and the *bad news* are both equally contained in John 3:16. Jesus did say that *For God so loved the world*, all of us, that He was moved to this wonderful act of grace through Christ. But it is only those *who believe* in Christ that will be saved. And He reiterated this in verse 18, that *whoever does not believe stands condemned already*. And unlike what we have just heard Paul say about the nation of Israel, the rest of us do not have all that time to wait to be saved.

We have instead the sobering words of Jesus in Matthew that at some point the opportunity for us ceases, and we find the door into the banquet of Salvation closed, and Christ will separate the saved from the unsaved, like a shepherd separating sheep from goats. No more sharing the same green pasture as we did on Earth, where the rain falls on the unjust as well as the just. Paul, in this very section of Romans, in Chapter 10, provides the well known formula for receiving salvation: *“if you confess with your mouth, “Jesus is Lord” and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved.”* Paul also made it clear in these three Chapters that nothing else provides salvation *“stressing that having been a nation that historically followed God was not going to save anyone. Neither was the fact of being blood descendants of people of faith, even of Abraham himself. Only “if” you personally believe.*

For a long time Cayman too had tried to live off the claim of having a Christian heritage. Nowadays, I am not sure we are even trying that. Christianity is now openly under attack. While the Christian faith of our foreparents was not going to give any of us salvation now except those who had the sense to embrace that faith for themselves, until recently people still recognised the many benefits that Christian faith had bequeathed to us. Including the legacy of a peaceful and caring community, a reputation for God-fearing honesty, and the other inherited blessings by which we still prospered. Now, Christianity is being told to sit down, shut up and keep out of the way of progress. And progress is increasingly defined as making quick money by any means without looking to the long term effects, and having a *“good time”* no matter how many children grow up uncared for and misdirected as a result. Ironically, the same people disparaging Christian living are standing around scratching their heads and wondering what happened to the Cayman that used to be so peaceful and crime free. Why are so many people constantly dissatisfied and complaining? Why is there such dishonesty and a lack of values? I am beginning to feel that here too those who put their faith in God are becoming a remnant.

I think all of you know about the six men who were lost at sea on an inflatable raft for nine days until spotted by a passing tanker the same day the authorities had called off the search for them. When one of the men was interviewed he said, *“Thank God; He did not give up on us and we did not give up on Him. God saved us.”* When I looked at this article on the Compass website, a reader had posted a comment saying, *“No, God did not help you. A giant tanker found you. And you need to give glory to the crewman and stop heaping praise on an invisible man in the sky.”* By the time I read that article, 86 people had stopped to tick that they agreed with that comment *“only 44 disagreed. Twice as many people agreed with the godless view. Furthermore, another reader had tried to explain that it was indeed God who had saved them, the crewman who had spotted them was an instrument used by God in this. 18 brave souls had agreed with that explanation “ 54, or three times as many, disagreed! To me, that was sobering. Three times as many cannot see God at work “ because, as Paul said, they have been blinded and made hard hearted because they do not have faith in God.*

But Paul’s letter to the church in Rome can guide us in what to do in the face of this disheartening situation. First, *do not* lose heart! Do not be discouraged. Paul could still see God working His grace and purpose out in the world.

He was convinced we could retain our faith in the unchanging nature of the God who so loves the world that He keeps the door to salvation open to us much longer than we should expect. Secondly, his reaction to the lack of faith of his countrymen reminds us of what Christ calls on *us* to do for all those in Cayman now who have not believed in Him. Paul did not write off his unbelieving Israelites as a lost cause. Instead he was *passionate* for them, for their *salvation*. He said his heart was *filled* with great sorrow and unceasing anguish for them and he would wish to be accursed and cut off from Christ if it would save the rest of them. He said his heart's desire and *prayer* to God for the Israelites was that they may be saved. And that letter still speaks to all of us here in John Gray this morning, opening our eyes to the trustworthy nature of God and appealing to us to embrace the opportunity for fulfilment through God's grace in Christ and reject the misleading ignorance of those who do not know Christ, just as in Paul's day.

If you have not yet committed your life to Christ, Paul's letter is appealing to *you* to do so. His letter has shown how empty we are without a true relationship with God, our Creator. He demonstrates from human history how it is our nature as created beings that if we do not make Christ Lord of our lives then we let sin lord it over us. There is no safe medium in between. That is still the experience today. Billy Graham told of the people who would come to him with more money than they could ever use, or at the pinnacle of success in the business world or in Hollywood, and yet they confessed to a feeling of emptiness deep inside. Fill that emptiness with the Living Bread. Take the simple but profound step Paul outlined in Romans before it is too late and open your heart to the belief that Christ is the Son of God who raised Him from the dead, ask Him to take your sin away and commit to Him as Lord of your life. If you want to take this step, talk quickly to our Minister or any of our Elders.

For those of us who have already made that commitment to Christ, Paul shows *us* how we must live in response to God's love and grace. How, if we truly follow Christ as Lord, our lives should *ó should* - make people *want* to experience that same kind of joy, peace, fulfilment and elevated level of caring for our fellow human beings, whether the citizens of a great Rome or the hungry in the streets of a famine racked Jerusalem, where Paul was heading with aid for them when he wrote the letter. And we need to have the same level of passion as Paul had to help save all those who cannot see God because of their unbelief. And, like Paul, to do that we have to put great effort into being able to communicate with them and confront their prejudices and claims intelligently, in the context of the present. As we saw in today's text, Paul did not hide from the difficult topics; he confronted them head on, not just quoting bits of Scripture here and there, but showing how those Scriptures point to Christ and the unchanging faithfulness of God, and so lead people to accept His grace.

For *all* of us here this morning, there is a profound responsibility in our hands. There is no escaping one call or other from Christ. If we are already Christians, the call is to obey Him, live as new creations and make new disciples for Him. If we are not Christians, He is calling on you to open the door of your heart and let Him in. One call or the other. There is no in between. How will you respond?
Amen