

6a) Salvation: By Grace Through Faith

Tom Peryer

Ephesians 2:1-10

Sanctuary, 19th October 2025

It is both an honour and a somewhat daunting matter to be speaking to you this morning in the presence of the Lord Bishop of Bath and Wells (to give him his full title). But as chance would have it, the roles were reversed earlier this week when I, metaphorically speaking, sat at his feet in St. John's Church, Keynsham, on the occasion of the induction of a new rector. The Church of St. Michael's Burnett, which is my other church, is one of the churches in the Keynsham Parish, so I was there to welcome the new man. I did think of repeating word for word what the Bishop said in his talk on Sunday, and then he would have said afterwards, "that was a truly excellent sermon." But I thought not.

Bishop Michael is with us on a pastoral visit to see how we all are. Not, I hasten to add, an inspection - The Church of England has not yet invented *OFSTICs* (the Office for Standards in Churches). However, I have no doubt that he will ask some searching questions, especially tomorrow evening when the three PCCs of Langridge, North Stoke and Weston come together for a combined session to talk about plans for mission. I hope at that meeting our responses will be rather more positive than a church not to be named, which responded to the question of a new and enthusiastic bishop. The questions and answers went something like this:

Question 1: “would the parish be willing to consider a stewardship program or a parish assessment?”

Answer: “No.”

Question 2: “On what date have you arranged to see the DVD, who pays the parson?”

Answer: “We have not.”

Question 3: “In what activity does your church plan to make progress during next year?”

Answer: “None.”

Question 4: “What is the best thing about your parish life from which others might learn?”

Answer: “We are solvent.”

Question 5: What help would you like to give to neighbouring parishes?

Answer: “We wouldn't.”

Well, that particular parish obviously fell short in the grace and faith department. And salvation by grace through faith is the Tenet we are explore-ng today, with three different sermons on the same topic. So, there's three opportunities to see this explored. The word ‘Tenet’, as might have been mentioned in previous sermons on our series, comes from the Latin word meaning ‘to hold on to’. It's the same root as ‘tenacious’. So, we're exploring the things that we as Christians and as a church need to hold on to for dear life. To be tenacious about.

There are many things in church life that people do hold on to for dear life, but they're not very important. That's not true of our text today: "By grace you have been saved through faith." It is without doubt one of the most important statements in the Bible: "By grace you have been saved through faith." It ranks along such statements which we've already heard: "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." Or Jesus' words, "I am the way, the truth, the life." It ranks alongside that.

Now, you may not know that next Sunday, the last Sunday in October, is acknowledged by many Protestant churches (though curiously not the C of E), as Reformation Sunday. Why? Well, because it was on the 31st of October, 1517, that an obscure and overweight monk kick-started what we now call 'The Reformation'. This was the day when Martin Luther sent a letter to his archbishop, and he may also, as legend would have it, march down the high street of the university town of Wittenberg (where he was a theology professor), and nail that letter with its 95 statements to Castle Church, Wittenberg. And it was a letter that was like a touch paper to a bonfire. It challenged the Pope, the Church, and the teachings of the Church, especially as to how we are saved and how forgiveness works. And if you had to pick out five truly transformational moments in the history of the Church since the day of Pentecost, I reckon that day, that letter, would be one of those five key events. At first, Luther was challenging the corrupt practice of selling indulgences to people, thereby absolving them of their sins and reducing the time spent in purgatory by their relations and friends. But it wasn't long before Luther's grappling with Scripture led him to the same point that St. Paul had come to many centuries before that. Salvation is a matter of grace and faith. Salvation cannot be earned or bought, nor is it deserved. He and others came up with the phrase, "Sola Gratia, Sola Fide." In other words, "grace alone, faith alone", or "only by grace and only by faith". Sometimes we sing a song which begins, "only by grace can we enter, only by grace can we stand."

Salvation

So, in our text, we have three key words. We start with the first one: 'salvation'. Not a word which is in common parlance, if you like, nowadays. But the truth is, every one of us needs saving. Whether it be Chris Parry, whose funeral took place here on Friday, who was 84. Or little Hugo Saunders, who's going to be baptised by the Bishop in our next service. Salvation has many dimensions, and I want to spend more time on grace and faith. So, I just want to say that the Christian concept of salvation encompasses many things. Whether we acknowledge it or not, whether we like it or not, whether we know it or not, we all need salvation of one kind or another. It encompasses life in the here and now, as well as the life to come. It involves concepts of being rescued, being healed from our woundedness, being found in our lostness, being recognized for who we are and not who we are not, receiving pardon, freedom, hope, and purpose.

There's a young writer called Lamorna Ash, who's written a fascinating account of Christianity in the UK today, particularly as experienced by her generation: millennials. The book is called "Don't Forget We're Here Forever". And she started from a position of dismissing Christianity as anachronistic, unbelievable, irrational, small-minded, and about as much use as a chocolate teapot. By the end of her tour around the UK, she's edging towards calling herself a Christian. Now, while she's very critical of much of the Christianity she sees (some of it evangelical), she also is very aware that her own generation of millennials (20's – 30's), is in many ways a generation which is drifting, which is lost, which has no roots, and which deep down is empty and in pain. For instance, she says in her introduction, "my generation would like something to hold on to. Or at least the people I met during my research were seeking something to hold on to. I know I'm looking for something like that." And she also writes about "the roar of my generation's communal wanting for our lives not to be meaningless, for our future not to be wholly doomed." Her generation (millennials, generation Z), need saving as much as any other generation in whichever part of the world it is to be found.

There's more that could be said about what salvation means, but I want to move on to these two key words of the Reformation, these two key words of St. Paul, these two foundation stones underpinning our salvation, our security, our safety in Jesus Christ: 'grace' and 'faith'.

Grace

Grace is one of the most wonderful words in the English language, and it has produced a lot of children. We talk about grace before a meal. Gratitude; grace notes in music which add flourish and embellishment to music; a grace and favour house where you don't have to pay the rent; we might describe someone as gracious or graceful. And there of course is that wonderful verse in John's gospel and of his fullness that is Jesus fullness we have all received "grace upon grace" "charin, anti charistos" (χάριν ἀντὶ χάριτος)-as the Greek has it. One gracious gift after another.

I had a sad teenage life really, but when I was learning to play the piano I used a hymn book to teach myself and I used to tap out with one finger a hymn. The first one, the easiest one, was called 'Years I Spent in Vanity and Pride'. Now for a 14 year old that wasn't strictly true, was it? But I used to tap that out And the verse goes, "Oh, the love that drew salvation's plan. Oh, the grace that brought it down to man. Oh, the mighty gulf that God did span at Calvary." And one of the very best books on grace is by Philip Yancey called "What's So Amazing About Grace?" It's a wonderful book. And I've got glimpses of his book in here. And one of the writers he quotes in there is a man called Gordon MacDonald. And he said this, "the world can do almost anything as well as or better than the church. There's only the one thing the world cannot do, offer grace."

And similarly, there was once an international conference on the distinctiveness of the different world religions. It was at Oxford, apparently when they were discussing the unique contribution of Christianity, C.S. Lewis wandered into the room with his pipe and said, "What are you discussing?" And they explained. "Oh, that's easy. The difference is grace. That was the difference of Christianity."

So, what is grace? Well, we've probably all heard grace equals **God's Riches At Christ's Expense**, and that's very helpful and neat. And if you look up Bible dictionaries about grace, you get something like, "the concept of grace is central to the Christian faith, representing God's unmerited favour, divine gift, unconditional love, forgiveness, and the pathway to salvation." All true and very succinct, but perhaps a bit on the academic side.

To understand grace, you have to experience it. You feel it in the stomach as well as know it in the head. Here's an example of what 'ungrace' is. It concerns the American writer Ernest Hemingway, author of 'Farewell to Arms and the Old Man and the Sea'. He had a difficult and turbulent relationship with his mother, who was a gifted singer and musician - very competent, very controlling. Badly wounded in the First World War, Hemingway returned home as a young man of 21-22, whilst in the Red Cross. And he was drifting through life, and that really annoyed his mother. And what's more, he wouldn't listen to her. And one day, after a particularly rebellious episode on the part of her son, she threw him out of the house. And on his way out, or perhaps later, she gave him a letter. The letter contains these words:

"Every child born to a mother enters the world with a large and prosperous bank account, seemingly inexhaustible. The child makes withdrawals, but no deposits during its early years. Later, when the child has grown up, it is his responsibility to replenish the supply he has drawn upon.

The account needs some deposits, some good-sized ones in the way of gratitude and appreciation, interests in a mother's ideas and affairs, little comforts provided for her home, a desire to favour any of mother's prejudices on no account to outrage her ideas, flowers, fruit or candy or something pretty to wear, brought home to mother with a kiss and a squeeze. Many mothers I know are receiving these and much more substantial gifts and returns from sons of less ability than my son. Unless you, my son, Ernest, come to yourself, cease your lazy loafing and pleasure-seeking, stop trading on your handsome face and neglecting your duties to God and your Saviour Jesus Christ, there is nothing before you but bankruptcy. You have overdrawn.”

And what was the first name of Hemingway's mother, do you think? Yes, Grace. That, to our ears, may be pretty shocking. But actually, when you stop to think about it, it's pretty much in line with the thinking of most people. And that includes churchgoers. You know, secular culture, especially the cancel culture, can't deal with or come to terms with or understand unlimited grace and forgiveness. As far as the story of the prodigal son is concerned, the secular world, but also deep down a great many Christians, they implicitly believe that that story must have got muddled in the disciples' head when they wrote it down. What the father should have done was to send that feckless, ungrateful, hedonistic younger brother packing when he crawled back home. Or at the very least take him at his word and put him in the outhouse and earn his way back into the family hearth. And at the same time, to make a point, the father should have called the older brother in and given him the ring and a new robe and a feast for being such a hardworking boy, loyal, keeping the rules, undemanding. Yancey quotes an occasion when a preacher told the story of the prodigal son, like that the way I've just told it, and a woman shouted out, “that's the way it should have been wrote!”

You see, most of us veer towards the notion of thinking that deep down we deserve grace and being treated well because of the good things we've done or that we haven't done anything really terribly bad. We talk of deserving causes, deserving poor, and by and large we put ourselves into the category of deserving God's love. Now here's what grace, and in particular God's grace, looks like. Think of it as the helicopter, or rather the winch man in the helicopter, who comes out to rescue that feckless paddleboarder, swept far out to sea. Firstly, he goes in search of the man, and then when he finds him, he lowers himself down to the same level of the man, the same level of the sea. But once there, he doesn't question the man as to why and how he got there. He doesn't quiz him on the preparations he made or didn't make, whether he ignored the forecast, how well he knew the current, or have you got the money to pay for a rescue like this because if not we're off. He doesn't berate the man for being inappropriately dressed or ask whether he's a good or bad parent or how many penalty points he has on his license or which political party he votes for, or whether he's pro or against Trump, the Palestinians or the war in Ukraine. Not a thousand and one other things that we might harumph about.

No, what the rescuer does, what the saviour does, is probably ask the person's name, check if he's injured, and then explain exactly what the man has to do to be rescued, which is get your arms into this harness and hold on tight to me. There'll be plenty of times for questions and guidance later on. That is grace at work. That is God at work in the world and in our lives. That is what we have received. That is what we are called to give and proclaim.

Faith

And now faith. But grace alone cannot or does not bring the salvation to an individual. Grace is not a divine fiat that just makes something happen willy-nilly. Grace looks for a response. Grace needs a response. And faith is the response to that grace. It is a reaching out to the hand that has already reached out. As Martin Luther said: "faith is a living, daring confidence in God's grace." So sure and certain, that a man would stake his life on it a thousand times.

In the case of a man or woman swept out to sea, he or she is staking their life on the rescue, helicopter, pilot and winchman. Faith in the rescue team allows the man to do what he cannot do for himself, to be carried up into the safety of the helicopter and then flown to land. Faith doesn't ask then how much fuel is in the helicopter, what the qualifications of the pilot are, nor does the man adrift in the sea say, if he is sensible, "no thanks, I could do this on my own."

Faith is the act by which a person lays hold on God's resources, becomes obedient to what God prescribes, and abandoning all self-interest and self-reliant trusts, trusts God completely. In the case of a helicopter rescue, this is not, of course, a blind faith, a reaching out for something that is not there. The waters are destroyed, there is the noise, there's the man, or woman hovering about it. But the same is true with us. Faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and his grace is not blind faith. It is not faith in a myth or a nice idea or a verbal concept. It is faith in the record of history. Christ has come. Christ has died. Christ has risen. And those things have made all the difference. We reach out to hands that are known and trusted. And although we cannot physically touch those hands or that wounded side of Jesus as Thomas did, we still have the best of grounds for believing. And in so doing, we who have not seen him face to face are especially blessed, as Jesus told Thomas.

And trust and faith are not just matters of the head, but involve the heart and hands and feet. If you put your trust in someone, then you give yourself to them. You take them at their word. You give them your loyalty and you follow what they say. Faith is not just believing in the head. That's only one aspect of the roundedness of faith and trust. So many people confuse being a Christian with a set of propositions that you give intellectual assent to. There is that, but faith and trust are so much richer than that. and engaging and riskier. We may have all read the manual on how to drive the car or operate the new washing machine or do the circular walk, but until you start driving and operating the machine and walking, well, it's all head.

Grace and faith, two legs walking together. Grace and faith, two dancers dancing together. Grace and faith, action and reaction. Grace and faith, rescuer and rescued. St. Paul liked to say "here is a true and trustworthy saying." He didn't say it of this text, but he might well have done. But we can say "here is a true and trustworthy tenet. Something we can hold on to with all our hearts." By grace we are saved through faith. Amen

Closing Prayer

Lord, help us to take these words into our hearts and then into our lives we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.