

Unexpected Grace. III.

We saw last week how the people of Israel were called to be the priests of God, the ones who were to proclaim the message of God's love and forgiveness to everyone. They were the chosen people, chosen not for their own sake, not to be saved while others were lost, but chosen as the means by which God would bring redemption to all. So too with the church, God's new Israel. We were chosen by God as the recipients of his grace not so that this could be for our benefit, but so that by that grace, we could be of benefit to others. We are called not for our own sake, but so that we may serve the purposes of God, who alone decided to whom to give his grace. It is in Jesus Christ that we see the purposes of God most clearly, and it is in Jesus Christ we see the fullness of God's grace made known to us.

But that grace made known to us in Jesus Christ is, as we have found before, a shocking and scandalous grace. God does the unexpected yet again, and comes to us as a human being, one of us, one with us, sharing with us in every human weakness and suffering, yet remaining for all that without sin. God shatters our conventions and social norms first by being born of a virgin. That in itself is enough to shock many people, from Joseph, Mary's fiance, to those in our day who find this whole idea offensive. Not only is it a challenge to our credibility, it also appears to be a pious cover-up for a teenager's illicit foray into sex. Yet God accepts the possibility that his method of bringing redemption to us will be misconstrued.

So who are we to challenge God's designs? His grace comes to us in shocking and scandalous forms; is it not surprising then that when he himself took on human nature, it would come about in a way which offends our sensibilities? But this then is grace; this then is the mercy of God. He does not use a means which compels us to accept what is going on: as always, what God does can be accepted and seen for what it is only through the eyes of faith. That does not mean that we have to be credulous and gullible, accepting everything that people say is an act of God or a word from God. But it means that those who are in relationship with God, trusting in him and looking to him for his salvation, will recognise this event for what it is: the power of the Holy Spirit visiting a virgin who offers herself to be used in this way regardless of the scandal and disgrace she invites for herself and for her child. Do we too have that

faith, that trust, that openness, to be willing to accept that God would choose to come into the world to save us by such scandalous means?

We can if we prefer, see this as a cover-up for an illegitimate birth, or a myth concocted to justify and explain why we have arbitrarily fastened on this one baby as something special. But in doing so, we miss the grace of God, which does not conform to our expectations, to our sensibilities and our views as to the way things should be done.

We can refuse to accept anything that does not happen the way we think it should, and in doing so we fall into the same trap as Cain, as Jacob, as Joseph's brothers, as king Saul, as Miriam and Aaron. We can fail to recognise that God's grace not only comes to the undeserving, it can only be recognised by the undeserving, for those who think they deserve God's grace also think they know best as to how that grace should operate and to whom it should come. If we truly are trusting in God and relying on his grace to save us, then we will accept that grace however, whenever and to whomever it comes.

Thus Jesus was born of a virgin, by the power of the Holy Spirit, and became one of us. He was born in God's time, when all things had been made ready, even though many of the people of Israel did not recognise the time or the season. Those to whom the Messiah had been promised failed to keep watch. You will no doubt have read over the Christmas season the story of how the wise men from the East came to Jerusalem seeking the child who was born the king of the Jews. Herod called his scribes and priests, who told him exactly where to look for this new-born king. By inquiring from the wise men, he found out when the king had been born, and we read that all Jerusalem knew of these events. But there were many others who already knew what had taken place: the shepherds, and the many people whom the shepherds told of what had happened; Simeon the priest in the temple, who spoke of Jesus as the one God had sent; Anna, the prophetess, who told everyone in the temple about the child.

So what God had done was not kept a secret; by no means, many people knew about it. But what of the priests who met the wise men and looked up the prophetic scrolls for Herod? Surely they would scamper away to Bethlehem to see for themselves the

fulfilment of what they had preached and studied for years? But no, we do not read of that happening. They knew what had taken place, but they had no eyes, no understanding, no faith to perceive the grace of God at work. Thus they missed out on seeing what they taught to others. We too can be like the priests; worshipping God and serving him, even while we are failing to perceive what it is that God is doing in our very midst. If we do not have our eyes open to the grace of God, if we are not a believing people, trusting God to save us, then we too will miss seeing what we should see.

Christ came to us as the one God promised. But even in the prophecies of his coming we can see that he would not be whom we would expect. Isaiah tells us of God's long looked-for saviour: *but who has believed what he said? He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him. He was despised and rejected by men:* famous words, but do we really think what it means? Not that he was carefully listened to and his claims considered, but that he was overlooked, ignored, ridiculed, disregarded, not taken seriously at all. As it says, *he was despised and we esteemed him not.* We thought he was smitten by God, and so we turned away from him. After all, misfortune may be contagious - if someone is under God's judgement, better to avoid him so as not to get caught up in it with him. Yet this was the Lord's will - to punish him for our sins, for our transgressions and rebellion. So to fail to recognise what God was doing is to fail to recognise God's grace.

Only those who are prepared to accept the shocking and unexpected grace of God are prepared to accept that by those means we are to be saved. Otherwise, we find other ways, less shocking, less scandalous, more in keeping with proper behaviour and social convention, by which we presume that we will be saved. We invent for ourselves a more seemly religion which does not offend us. However, what we invent is a fraud, a deceit, a lie and a deception. We cannot be saved by our own means: we depend totally and utterly on the grace of God, and it is only if we are prepared to allow God to take the initiative in whatever way he desires that we will benefit from that grace. For grace comes to the undeserving, the undemanding, the repentant and humble; that is, those who allow God to act in whatever way he wishes, regardless of how we feel about it.

Jesus constantly offended the religious leaders, the interpreters of the law, the upper classes, the rulers and officials of Israel; yes and many of the ordinary people as well. Surely if God came to us with the news of our salvation he would package the deal a little more attractively? Why alienate those you come to save? Why place impossible demands on their time, their resources, their credibility, their social sensibilities, their deep religious beliefs, which after all God himself had given in the law of Moses! But this is how Jesus acted when he came to us, God's own son from all eternity entering into our time to be one of us. He scandalised, he offended, he upset people, he did all the antisocial things, mixing with the wrong people, making harsh judgements on the Pharisees and others, insulting the rulers, even going so far as to give some honest merchants a good thrashing! Hardly the way to behave if you want people to listen to you, in fact he got people so riled up that several times they tried to kill him, and when they finally had him in their power, a huge crowd howled for his blood and celebrated when he was crucified. So it was that the rulers, the priests, the leaders of the people, and the mob generally, was finally satisfied that they had got rid of this troublemaker. Such is the strange grace of God, his unexpected, scandalising, irritating grace, that those who claimed to be looking for God to come to redeem them completely failed to recognise that redemption when it was in front of them.

Are we too in the same position? Will we too demand that God conform to our expectations, to our social conventions, to our standards of behaviour, and bring salvation to us in a way that we are able to accept; a salvation that does not disturb our moral complacency, our rather shady business practices, our hard-won social status, our well-deserved financial resources, our diligent study leading to respectable academic qualifications? Do we really expect God to leave all these unchanged? Can we really expect that God will save us without there being radical and unexpected and certainly unwanted changes in our comfortable and complacent suburban lives? God's grace when it comes to us is an unsettling grace, an unseemly grace, an inopportune grace, in short, a thoroughly disgraceful grace. But this is the only grace there is, and if we turn away from that grace, as so many have done in earlier ages, then we too will miss out on God's salvation. He calls us to repentance and faith; a hard repentance, a difficult faith, because it means turning aside from the way the world is going. It means a different way of living, a different way of believing, a different way of being in the world, a way that puts us at odds with all those who are not walking

the path of faith in God with us. A salvation that leaves us unchanged, untouched, virtually indistinguishable from all those around us, is in fact no salvation at all. This world is perishing, the people destined for destruction, a destruction that together we have brought upon us all by our common sin, our corporate rebellion and disobedience before God. There is a terrible fate that awaits all those who persist in their sin, who refuse to repent and seek God's forgiveness, who refuse to acknowledge his grace to us. If we are being saved from this fate, then surely it will make some difference to us, surely we will live differently, think differently, believe differently, behave differently, to those who are not being saved. Otherwise we would have to admit that our salvation is in fact no salvation at all; because after all, what effect does it have on us? What good is it to anyone else?

This is the basis of God's salvation: that provision is made for us in Christ, to have our sin and rebellion forgiven, to have new life through conversion and repentance, to be given a new way of living, a new purpose, a new perspective, in fact as the Scriptures promise for all those who believe, a whole new way of being: we become a completely new creation. But to share in this privilege we must be prepared to accept the means whereby it comes to us: in Christ, the eternal Son of God, incarnate for us as one of us, scandalously born of an unmarried mother, through the power of the Holy Spirit coming on a virgin girl, growing up in a social and political backwater, in a country that has been described as "the armpit of the Roman Empire," rejected, despised, misunderstood, scorned by his own people, who cheered when he was executed as a common criminal. This one, who was like no other human being who ever lived, was the means by which God chose to bring salvation to us all. And he was vindicated by God through being raised on the third day from the dead; an event which also has its critics. This is perhaps the most scandalous event of all; that someone who was justly executed as a troublemaker, a disturber of the peace, a social outcast, a blasphemer, a general all-round no-good person, was declared righteous and just by God, raised from the dead and given supreme authority over all things whatsoever! God has shown his grace to us in that even though we completely repudiated his own son, the one who came solely to bring redemption to us, this shocking event was used by God! Yes, not only used but intended as the very means by which we would be saved. For God's grace once again is shown to be a scandalous grace, a shocking grace, a totally offensive grace, and indeed an unexpected grace, in

that by our own sin in putting to death his son, he thereby delivered us from sin and from death and the grave. Now not only are we able to be freed from sin through his death, we are also able to be freed from our own deaths; the fate that awaits us all, so that just as Christ was raised from the dead, so too we will also be raised from the dead to immortal and incorruptible life, if we are prepared to accept that this can only come about through acknowledging God's grace to us. If we turn aside from God and from his provision for us, then there is no hope, no other salvation, no other deliverance, no way we can escape from his judgement. For God has chosen to save us by his grace, and we cannot otherwise be saved. We cannot demand that God lets us save ourselves by our own efforts; that he accepts our efforts to live good, moral and respectable lives, that we are allowed to decide whether or not we will believe what suits us and what does not disturb our enlightened minds.

To be saved by God's grace means to completely abandon our own expectations and to cast ourselves totally and without reservation on God's mercy. We can do nothing to earn our salvation; we can do nothing to deserve it; we can do nothing to force God to grant it; we can only come in faith and repentance, turning away from our rebellion and sin, and trusting only that God will save us. And God will save all those who come to him in faith, for he has promised to have mercy on the sinner who repents. God has abundant stores of grace, sufficient for all our needs, more than sufficient; for there is nobody whose sin exceeds the grace that God has shown towards us in giving his own beloved son to die as a sacrifice in our place, thereby taking away all our sin.

God is generous towards us, far more generous than we deserve, for after all we can never deserve the generosity of one against whom we so stubbornly, persistently and repeatedly rebel and sin. That is the measure of grace: that in spite of our sin, in spite of the fact that we turn against God every step of the way, still he reaches out to us, he calls to us, he goes after us seeking us out, making it possible for us to return to him and be saved. That is the grace of God, but only those who are prepared to accept it as grace will be saved. May God grant us all open and repentant hearts, so that we may turn again towards him and be delivered from our sin and its punishment. To his name be all praise and glory now and forever.