

Essentials - Rediscovering the heart of the Christian faith (SERIES)

Series (Parts 4, 5 & 6) Holy Trinity Twickenham, February 2007.

Part 4: Grace (Ephesians 2:1-10, John 1: 14-18)

I want to tell you about a woman I used to know. In fact, I first got to know her when I was in my late teens. She was the mother of my girlfriend at the time. Now, if she'd become my mother in law, I wouldn't be telling you this story. It would be more than my life's worth! So for now I'll call her Mrs J.

The story's about the time Mrs J realizes her house is in a bit of a mess. There's dust on the surfaces, and the kitchen and bathrooms need a good scrub. So she decides to employ a cleaning lady.

She places adverts in the newsagent's window and in the local paper, and she eventually finds somebody who fits the bill. And she's delighted. So she arranges for the cleaning lady to start the following week. But when it comes to the day before the cleaning, Mrs J suddenly has a horrible realization.

A strange woman is coming into her house. And she'll see the dust. She'll see all the grimy surfaces, and she'll look at the mess, and the cleaning lady will think the worse of her because of it. The cleaning lady will be thinking: 'She's the sort of woman who doesn't care about her house, the sort of woman who lets her house degenerate into such a state.' Mrs J's convinced that the cleaning woman will look at the house, and despise her.

So what Mrs J does is this: she herself gets out the cleaning equipment: the Hoover, the cloths, the spray and the cleaning fluid, and she spends the whole day cleaning the house. So that when the cleaning lady arrives the following day, she'll look at the house and be able to admire it, and say what a marvellous woman it must be, who can keep such a perfect home.

So whenever she knows the cleaning lady's coming round, she gets out her cleaning stuff, and she gives the whole house a once-over. To give the right impression to the cleaning lady, so she won't think any the worse of her for the state of her home.

Now you might feel, like I do, that this whole exercise is rather silly. Because it undermines the whole point of having a cleaning lady in the first place. It's only people who have a dirty house who actually need a cleaning lady. But when I remembered Mrs J earlier this week, two things struck me.

One is how relieved I feel that she never did become my mother-in-law. But I was also struck by how much we tend to do precisely what Mrs J did when we approach God.

In our worship we say, in all honesty, 'Our life isn't all it should be, we're in need of forgiveness, we need a Saviour, and in Christ God saves us from our sin.' That's why, in our Communion Service, we use phrases like: 'cleansing the thoughts of our hearts', and 'we have sinned against you', and 'we are truly sorry and repent of all our sins' and so on. In other words, we admit in our worship that we need the spiritual equivalent of a cleaning lady. And that left to ourselves, we make a mess of it all.

But so often we act as if we need to earn God's approval, by trying to clean things up ourselves. And then, if we get things clean enough, only then do we feel ready to invite God in, so he'll be impressed by what he finds. I'm convinced that so many of us feel deep down the way God works is something like this:

He's sitting somewhere, way beyond the blue, with an enormous cleanliness meter. And then, at the end of the day, if he judges that my life is clean enough and I've made the grade, only then will he lower himself to enter. So many people seem to be trying to impress God by putting on a good show.

I suspect the mental image lots of us have of Jesus, is taken from that painting in St Paul's Cathedral by Holman-Hunt, **The Light of the World**. Jesus stands on the outside of a door, saying: 'Behold I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in.' But in our version he then

adds, 'But only if Mr Sheen's been in first.'

The trouble is, that's not good news for us. That's bad news. Because under those circumstances, we can never be sure if we've made it. We're always trying to impress God by our actions, never really knowing if he's impressed by them or not. We're trying to put on a good show to God. To say to him, 'It's all right, you only have to do a little bit of cleaning in my house because I'm quite a respectable person, I'm a nice person.'

The problem is, all this reverses what's meant to be happening. In our reading, the Apostle Paul is writing to a group of Christian believers in the city of Ephesus, which is a great cosmopolitan trading centre on the coast of Turkey. In fact, it's a city where Paul himself had lived for two or three years, so he'd got to know this particular group of people well.

And these Ephesian Christians seem to have been falling into the same trap so many of us fall into. Relying on their own capacity to try hard or be specially good, rather than on the free, undeserved, lavishly splashed out, grace of God. Like Mrs J, they appear to have been talking about their need of a saviour, but then doing their own cleaning so the saviour won't be disappointed with them when he arrives.

So Paul in his letter to the Ephesians has to remind them of the starting point of all honest faith: that they can never be perfect under their own steam, or maybe I should say 'under their own steam-cleaning'. There are stains so deep that only God himself is big and powerful enough to erase them. And that God, in Christ, comes to us when the dust's at its thickest and all the dishes are still piled high and mouldering away in the sink.

The most powerful word in the whole Bible is that word grace. And in its biblical setting grace means this: God's love and blessing to people who really don't deserve it. It means no matter how hard we try, we can never earn God's love. We can only accept the forgiveness which was gained for us through Christ's death and rising again, as a free gift. Without price and without precondition.

The good news of grace is that all the images people use to gauge whether we've made the grade are obsolete. People often think of God writing our sins on a slate, then wiping them off if we repent. People think of God putting our sins on one side of a pair of scales and weighing them against our good deeds on the other.

Now hear what I'm saying, because this is so important. The good news of grace is not that God does lots of wiping of the slate as we repent. The good news of grace is not that our good deeds outweigh the bad ones.

The good news of grace is that God has binned the slate and the scales for ever. The whole nerve-racking business of earning the favour of God has been declared a pointless activity, for those who are 'in Christ' - to use Paul's phrase. God in Christ has declared a full amnesty. He's even forgiven in advance the wrongs we haven't even thought about doing yet! He's guaranteeing forgiveness in advance.

Now, you might think this all sounds rather too good to be true. In fact, if you think about it, it's scandalous. God appears to be giving up his best bargaining position by declaring forgiveness in advance. It seems to leave him with no leverage. God seems to be taking a massive risk, either that we'll stop trying to live moral lives, or that we'll start to take this grace for granted.

I once spoke on grace in a church in the Midlands, on how it was all a free gift and we could do nothing to earn it. And afterwards the vicar came up to me and said, 'Maybe you should tone it down a bit, all that 'unmerited' stuff. I find that a good dose of trying to earn God's favour keeps them nice and guilty. It keeps them trying harder to be good, because that way, they stay worried that God might not accept them.'

And this is why so many Christians are the most guilty, tense people you will ever meet. Because they've misunderstood the heart of the Christian faith: that word 'grace'. They think it's all about trying to earn God's love, by trying hard and cleaning up their act.

But that's not the Gospel Paul's telling the Ephesians about. And it's not authentic Christianity. The Gospel of grace is that God really is taking a massive risk by making his love condition-free. The gospel of grace says that the only obstacle to knowing God is not on God's side. If there is an obstacle, it can only be my reluctance to receive and open a free gift.

The gospel of grace tells us that God is not sitting grimly somewhere, holding onto writing slates and balancing scales. It tells us that he stands with his arms open to greet us, patiently waiting for us to come home.

The gospel of grace tells us that the house of my life may be a mess. The dust may be ankle deep. The dishes may be green and furry in the sink. But that somebody's already paid the price for the clean-up operation. And the cleaner himself is standing at the door and knocking, just waiting to come in and get started. All I have to do is open the door.

Part 5: What is Worship? (Psalm 96, Mathew 2:1-8)

The English word 'worship' comes from the idea of 'worth-ship', attributing worth or honour to somebody. And throughout the Bible we're encouraged to worship God. That's what the Magi do in our gospel reading: they worship Jesus. And you get the same emphasis in the Psalms: 'Sing to God, praise him, worship him'.

We're getting near the end of our series of talks called Essentials. And so far, we've mostly been looking at what Christians believe. But for the last two sessions we're looking at the implications of our beliefs in our everyday lives. And today we're thinking about the whole idea of worship. But what is worship?

There are two main words for worship in the Bible, in the Hebrew language. The first means 'bowing down' before God as a sign of respect. The other means 'service' – in other words, serving God. So I just want to unpack these a bit more. What is worship?

1) Worship is a God-thing: Worship isn't a performance, to show how clever musicians are or how skillful the preacher is or how fluent the prayers are. The point of worship is to glorify God, and to lead people into a sense of God's presence.

And that has the effect of putting my own concerns in context. Many of us spend our lives wrapped up with our work, families, our hobbies, our anxieties. But worship shifts the focus to God himself. There's a dramatic moment in the book of Isaiah, when Isaiah has an amazing vision of God. And all he can focus on is God's majesty. It's only later that he starts to think about himself, and he realizes that in comparison with God's glory his own concerns aren't that significant after all.

Another reason we worship is to prevent us making a god in our own image. The stress today is always on 'my lifestyle', 'what feels right to me'. But worship is all about finding God as he is, not pursuing our own images of what we'd like God to be. Worship puts God centre-stage. There's a church in America whose vision statement says this: 'It's so not about me'. Now, I don't like the grammar very much. But it's a great summary of what worship is: 'It's so not about me!' It's a God-thing.

2) Worship is a whole-life thing: Worship doesn't just mean the songs I sing and the prayers I pray on a Sunday morning. It includes my lifestyle, my mind, my emotions, my money, my priorities, my family life, everything. Remember: one of the root meanings of worship is to live a life of service to God. We shouldn't be people who divide life up into little boxes: doing one thing in church, and something quite different for the rest of the week. Worship is a whole-life thing.

3) Worship is a shared-thing: People who have faith in Jesus aren't just spiritual Lone Rangers, each doing our own thing. So much of the language of the Bible is shared, corporate. The apostle Paul says we're in the body of Christ. We're bound together by a shared faith, and shared values.

One of the things worship does is to build up our shared life together. Of course the focus of worship is on God himself, but shared worship also builds up the community of people who're doing the worshipping.

And that's why worship is a nonsense if there's antagonism between members of a church. Paul says that if two people have an argument, they should sort it out before they share in Holy Communion. And I'd say that's still a good rule of thumb today. If you've had an argument with somebody, or there's some sort of tension there, don't sweep it under the carpet. If you're angry with me or another person in church, or there's been a misunderstanding, don't receive Communion as if nothing's happened. Talk to the person concerned. Clear the air first, then your Communion's going to mean so much more. Worship is a shared thing.

4) Worship is a story-thing: The Christian faith is shaped by an extraordinary story. It's been called 'the greatest story ever told'. Worship helps us make sense of who we are and the story of our own lives, by fitting it into the bigger story of God's dealings with the world.

Every time we worship together we retell the story of the death and resurrection of Jesus. In our hymns and sermons we retell the story of what God's done for us and our ancestors in the faith. And that gives us a sense of our place in history and in the purposes of God. It helps us establish our own identity. So worship is a story thing.

So worship is a God thing, it's a whole-life thing, it's a shared thing and it's a story thing. But what does worshipping actually involve?

1) Worship is lifestyle: I start with this, because it's something we can easily forget. Say the word 'worship' and most of us think of church on a Sunday. But worship's more than songs and prayers: it's the whole of our lives.

My old school had a motto: 'Laborare est orare', which is Latin and literally means: 'To work is to pray', which at the time I found odd because I thought, 'No it's not. Work is work, and prayer is prayer, what's it on about?' But recently I heard a better translation: 'your work is worship'. And I discovered that the phrase comes from the German church leader Martin Luther, who was trying to work out what being a Christian meant in the early modern era, in a busy modern culture.

What he's saying is that the way we live is part of our worship to God. If we never sing another note, or never pray another prayer, we can still be worshipping God. In the way we use our money, time, the way we live our family lives, and so on. People have a right to look on and make judgments about the genuineness of our faith by the kind of lifestyle which results. Are we more generous, how do we handle our relationships, are we arrogant?

So worship isn't just something for Sunday best, it's about our whole lifestyle and priorities.

2) Worship is praise: Time after time in the Bible, you find people praising God, in words or in songs. Most times of revival or renewal in the church are accompanied by a flurry of new songwriting. It's an expression of the renewal of a desire to worship. To spend quality time with God, praising him for who he is and what he's done.

But here's something important. The style of worship has to be relevant to the culture of those worshipping. The church in every age has to take a timeless message, but it has to then express it in ways that the people of today can relate to. We've got to keep asking ourselves: what are we saying through the styles of music we use, the type of hymns, the way they're expressed, the type of instruments we use, the language of the service, and so on?

The style of services and music in church should never fossilize in one particular era. A church isn't a museum, and I never want to be the curator of a museum. A church is a place where people meet God today, and where people feel they can be themselves. That's why it's so important that each of us feels there are at least some services we can enjoy and relate to.

And this is why it's important that we keep trying to be as creative as possible with the music and prayers here at Holy Trinity. So we're really engaged with our worship, and it never becomes just a dull ritual.

(Incidentally, there are some styles of service we don't really do here. We don't do a high-church 'Catholic' style, or a loud 'Pentecostal' style of worship. But that's OK. Some people have joined us from those kind of church backgrounds because they enjoy our style of service. A few people have gone to other churches from here, because we didn't offer a style of service they found worshipful. And that's fine. What matters is that you find a way of worshipping that really connects for you.)

3) Worship is witness: If you ask new church members how they came to faith, it's usually because people found a church they liked. And usually they were brought along by a friend. The most powerful thing a church like ours has to offer our community is a working model of a better way to live. The witness of a group of people who're motivated by their faith, who try to live out that faith in their lives, and celebrate that faith when they come together. In other words, people worshipping.

Out there in our community, there are lots of people who're confused about their beliefs and their values; there are people who're struggling in their relationships; there are people who're struggling to be good parents; there are people who've lost the wonder of life.

Our worship is partly about bowing down before God, and living for God in our world. But it's also about giving hope to our neighbours and friends and families.

Part 6: Prayer (Psalm 84, Matthew 6:1-8) © Bev Watson

Well here we are, 8 weeks into the New Year, and I wonder how our new year's resolutions are going? Perhaps you're very disciplined, and wrote them down at the beginning of the year, and have kept them religiously ever since. Maybe there was just one thing you made a mental note to do – going to the gym every Tuesday lunch-time say - and it's been going quite well. Perhaps you'd have to think quite hard even to remember what those resolutions were; January seems a long time ago...

I had to rack my brains a bit, but I did recall 3 things that I intended to do. The first was to be more disciplined about taking exercise. I guess that's fairly standard. My plan was to go swimming twice a week. It started quite well, but then I got a cold, and haven't been since the end of January. Not brilliant! As well as exercise we might make a new years resolution about relationships. Maybe we should spend less time at the office, and a few more hours with our children, if we have them. My second resolution this year was to spend just a little bit less time with our children, and instead to set aside one evening a month to go out somewhere with my husband. It is easy to overlook that relationship in the busyness of family life. And the third decision was perhaps a bit more unusual: it was to reserve some proper time again to pray. After all, I am training to be ordained, and I do know that that should be one of the top priorities!

So why pray? It is one of the 'essentials' of the Christian life, which is what we've been looking at in our sermons since New Year. Partly I've been inspired again by a book which someone gave me for Christmas. It's called Finding Sanctuary, and came out of a TV programme called The Monastery, which was shown a year or so ago. It was basically a reality TV show, observing 5 ordinary men who chose to spend 40 days and nights in a Benedictine monastery. They joined in with a daily routine of prayer that has hardly changed for the last 1500 years. And they attempted to live by the values of the community, which are chastity, silence, obedience and humility. Not exactly the most obvious ideals for the 21st Century! It was a hugely popular programme: viewer ratings topped 2.5 million. I'm sure that's partly just because reality TV is still fairly popular. But it may also come from a sense that there just might be something here of real value for our lives...

So what is prayer anyway? The Psalm gives some real insights. It's Psalm 84, and is in itself a prayer.

The writer says, vv 1,2,10 'How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord Almighty! My soul yearns, even faints for the courts of the Lord; my heart and flesh cry out for the living God... Better is one day in your courts than a thousand elsewhere'. He's talking about being in God's presence, which for him is the most wonderful thing. These are not really the words of someone who sees prayer primarily as a strenuous discipline or exercise. They come across, rather, as the words of a fairly hopeless romantic; he says (v10) 'I'd rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of the wicked'. If we compare it with new year's resolutions say, it's more like setting aside time to be with someone you care about, than deciding to go to the gym every week!

His prayer seems to come out of a deep sense of his need for God. He writes (v2), 'My soul yearns, even faints for the courts of the Lord; my heart and flesh cry out for the living God'. St. Augustine, in the 4th century wrote, Our hearts were made for You, O Lord, and they are restless until they rest in You (x2). That might explain our society's great interest in 'spirituality' of one kind or another. Yet the psalmist here is very clear that his need is for God, and that it is in God's presence that he will find everything he needs.

He lists one of those things that he needs as safety, or security. He says, (v3) 'Even the sparrow has found a home, and the swallow a nest for herself, where she may have her young – a place near your altar, O Lord God Almighty'. This seems to go way beyond ideas of worldly security, or national security, to knowing that ultimately our lives are safe in God's hands.

He talks about joy (v4): 'Blessed are those who dwell in your house; they are ever praising you'. The Bible is always talking about joy; and interestingly it hardly ever mentions happiness. Joy seems to imply a much deeper, richer quality of life, which is found in God's presence, and in worship.

The Psalmist is also completely sure of God's goodness and favour: he says (v11), 'The Lord God is a sun and shield; he bestows favour and honour; no good thing does he withhold from those whose walk is blameless'. He doesn't have to spell out to God what he needs; God knows his needs even before he mentions them. It's easy to think of prayer as a shopping list, where we tell God what we need. Here it is more an expression of trust in the fact that he already knows what we need.

He finds strength in God too, (v5,7) and writes: 'Blessed are those whose strength is in you, who have set their hearts on pilgrimage....They go from strength to strength, till each appears before God in Zion'. I think he means an inner strength that develops and grows as we spend time in God's presence, in prayer.

And he ends in a place of peace (v12), with the words: 'O Lord Almighty, blessed is the one who trusts in you'.

I don't know about you, but these things seem to me to be of great value for us in our everyday lives: safety or security, joy, an understanding of God's goodness and his favour, and a growing strength and inner peace. They are things which come out of a relationship with God. And so if this is the heart of what prayer is, the question is 'how do we get there?'. How does prayer become a reality in our lives?

In our Gospel reading today Jesus gives us some good advice: he says (Matt 6:6), 'when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father who is unseen'. He seems to assume that taking time out to pray is the norm. The Gospels often refer to the fact that Jesus himself got up early, and went to a quiet place to pray. The Benedictine tradition is based on set times of prayer which provide a framework for the monastic life. Perhaps our own New year's resolutions are, in themselves, a reminder of the fact that we do need to set aside time for things that are important. That might be relationships, or exercise or hobbies; if we don't, they tend not to happen.

Well, you might think that setting aside time to pray is easy enough for single people who live in monasteries, but rather more tricky for us in our busy, child-friendly lives. Perhaps the challenge is to be imaginative. Take the dog for a walk! We've got a Labrador puppy in our house, and it generally falls to me to take him out during the week. I sometimes take him along the river, and it's a lovely way to spend time enjoying God's creation. I tend to assume that I'm taking the dog for a walk, but the truth may well be that God is taking me for a walk, because he knows that I need it. Or maybe your office is quieter than your home, and it may be easier to find space there at lunchtime to pray. And I'm sure we shouldn't underestimate praying with our children if we have them; it's very easy to read a Bible story together, and then say a prayer, and that can quite naturally become a way of life. I'd be interested to hear of any other ideas you have...

So, finally, what resources are there to help us pray? There are many, and a fairly accessible one is Bible Reading notes. I know some of us already read them regularly. They make the point that if prayer is more of a relationship than a shopping list, then we need to listen to God as well as to speak to him. And reading the Bible is perhaps the most tried and tested way of listening and learning. They're quite simple, and give a short passage from the Bible for each day, and then some comments from a whole range of different writers. Some give suggestions for prayer too. They're the sort of thing you could read on the train on your way into work, without looking too weird!

You may know that today is the first Sunday in Lent. Lent is often associated with giving things up such as chocolate or caffeine. Maybe this Lent would be a good time to take something up, and to set aside some time to pray. Instead of New Year's resolutions, we could move on to Lenten resolutions. One of these could be to find a deeper relationship with God through prayer. Jesus said (Matt 6:6), 'When you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you'.