

20200505-Easter-5

Our Collect today prays that God's grace might 'go before us' to put into our hearts 'good desires'. Grace is a tricky concept to frame and to understand. We can think of ways we might use the word: 'good graces'; 'graceful'; 'gracious': it's a word that somehow speaks of a lack of fear, of elegance, of kindness, of that certain sort of service and giving that refuses to know about prejudice and that continues to work in the face of ugliness, and of spite and of hatred.

During this past week I have achieved something I long wanted to do but what with time and more important things never quite got around to. At Mary's prompting I re-purposed an old laptop I was given in 2005 and put a modern operating system on it, so that it once again becomes useful. It's no longer a PC or an Apple Mac, it's running something called Linux.

Linux was written by someone who gave all their efforts away for free. It now runs on millions of computers, even commercial ones. It all came about because of someone's "good graces" in being "gracious" and giving.

This week has also seen the launch of the UK Blessing song with over a million views online. Again someone wanting to be gracious and thanking others through the gift of a song.

Grace is freely given and somehow gently requests rather than demands, a response. When I read the account of the martyrdom of Stephen that we've just heard, I think of Stephen as a graceful person: Acts 6 says he was a person 'full of grace and power'. He was chosen as a deacon, one of the seven. This group of people was specifically set-up and called, in order to solve a dispute, possibly one of the first serious disputes, in the early church. Just think of that: the Holy Spirit solved a dispute through the gift of the grace to serve people dinner. That's all. Just dinner. The UK Blessing song was offered on account of some city churches handing out food parcels, something of course many of us enable through gifts to local Food Banks.

Stephen as he started to serve, then went on to become someone who performed as the scriptures say 'great wonders and miraculous signs'. His grace in giving, his servanthood, had somehow caused an even greater in-filling by the Holy Spirit, to enable him to become something even greater.

And grace is a funny thing, because somehow it isn't all one-way. The gracious person is able to receive as well as give. Think of someone you know who is gracious. If you complement them, they are likely to be self-deprecating perhaps certainly, but will accept it and probably return it to.

Our Gospel reading shows what lies at the root of this power to do good, that Stephen displayed. Jesus tells us that it is the Father living in Him, that performs His miracles and healings, his works. It is this 'in-dwelling' by God, by His grace, that promises to enable us to then do as Jesus goes onto say: 'greater works' than he did. The trigger to all this Jesus says, is simply to be-

lieve in him. And of course He explained this in the face of both Thomas and Philip especially, being less than gracious towards their Lord.

I wonder what a lack of grace looks like? In our Gospel reading Philip had asked Jesus that he might be shown the Father; plainly he couldn't accept who Jesus is. Philip had witnessed all those healings and miracles and still couldn't accept who Jesus is. Interestingly Philip came from Bethsaida, a town Jesus had spoken about:

"Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes".

Plainly a certain scepticism ruled in Bethsaida. It seems that scepticism certainly was an ingredient in this lack of grace.

And so the 'good desires' our Collect speaks of, are formed in us by our cultivating a proper haven, a home, for 'good desires' within ourselves. That home tends to be graceful in serving, it is 'full of grace' in believing, it is happy both to give and to receive; it tends to avoid scepticism.

Yet is that the end of the story? I think not, because the Collect goes onto speak of needing God's continual help. Being graceful somehow does not come easily. I imagine it does not come easy especially during this time of lockdown. Even as we start to emerge, there will no-doubt be some considerable tests ahead as we try to keep people safe whilst also start to get the world of work going again.

There is to grace also something about surrender. Perhaps graceful people can be graceful because they know that they need not depend upon themselves for a sense of wellbeing or of purpose to their lives or indeed need to worry overly about the future.

The marriage service starts by saying: "God of wonder and of joy: grace comes from you, and you alone are the source of life and love". And of course that love is poured into us because of Jesus: "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth" John 1.14.

Somehow the practice of being with Christ in prayer, of going into that inner temple and spending time with him, to witness to his glory, is what translates us into gracious people, people who in serving reveal Christ to those we are amongst.