

GROUNDING *in Grace*

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St John's mission statement reads as follows: 'St John's Cathedral is a place of God's grace, welcoming all, following Christ and changing lives in the heart of Hong Kong.' It is simple, elegant, profound, and accurate! But what does it truly mean to be a 'place of God's grace'? What is 'Grace'? This was the subject of our 'Grace in a Busy Week' series this past November, which included my talk, 'Grounded in Grace'. Over 3 Thursdays, I presented Grace—God's unmerited, one-way love for sinners—as both the foundation and the culmination of the Church and its mission. We explored how Grace impacts our spiritual lives, our relationships, and the Church's purpose in the world. In case you missed it, here is a brief summary.

The question 'What is Grace?' is best answered by reframing it. Not what, but WHO is Grace? The answer is Jesus Christ. Jesus is the embodiment of Grace. His one-way love for sinners is the very definition of Grace. Jesus illustrated Grace first through His teaching and healing ministry. Examples abound—the workers who only worked 1 hour receive a full day's wage; a little boy's snack feeds 5,000 men; Jesus chooses to dine with sinners and tax collectors; the seed is sown everywhere, even if most of it will not bear fruit; the shepherd leaves the 99 to search for the 1 lost sheep; the best wine (in abundance!) is saved for last; and 'the first shall be last, and the last shall be first'. How did people respond to Jesus' ministry of Grace for the least, the lost, and the last? They crucified him. But then he rose from the dead, and the same disciples who had abandoned Him suddenly realised the depth of God's Grace in Jesus Christ—that even in their sin, weakness, and fear, Christ gave His life as a ransom for many. The same is true for you and me, Jesus' followers today. We follow, we trust, we listen, and we believe. And then we sin, we fear, we doubt, we fail. We go back and forth from being lost and found, last and first, sinner and saint. Yet God's Grace remains. It is the rock upon which we build our flimsy houses of faith.



Our spiritual lives, grounded in grace, are therefore best summed up by the prayer from Mark 9.22-24 of the father whose son was possessed by a demon. He said to Jesus, 'if you can do anything, have pity on us and help us.' Jesus replied, "If you can?" Everything is possible for one who believes.' Immediately the boy's father exclaimed, 'I believe; help my unbelief.' Jesus knows we believe, and He knows we need help with our unbelief.

Knowing He is gracious to us, that ‘everything is possible for one who believes’, enables us to come back to Jesus when we are lost, trusting that His ‘*mercies are new every morning*’—Lamentations 3.23, and that there is ‘*more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over 99 righteous persons who do not need to repent*’—Luke 15.7. It only takes a mustard seed of faith to be covered in God’s Grace.

Understanding this about our own spiritual lives helps us to show that same kind of Grace in our relationships. How do we respond when someone messes up? What do we say and do when someone hurts us or something we care about? How did the Father respond when the Prodigal Son squandered his share of the inheritance and returned full of shame? He threw a party! Not because the Father agreed with or condoned the wayward actions—far from it!—but because his son was back. He had been lost and was now found. He had been dead and was now alive. When someone is lost in their own self-centredness (like the son in the distant country), there is not much we can do to change their ways. The Father does not chase after him, he does not try to fix or control him, and he certainly does not enable him. He watches and waits for a change of heart, and when the son returns, he does not scold or lecture him. Instead, he rejoices that the relationship is restored and lavishes him with love and grace. Have you ever been shown love and favour when you least deserved it? That is Grace. And I bet it made you *want* to be better, rather than simply feel you ought to be. That is what God’s Grace in Jesus Christ does for those who put their trust in Him. And then God uses us—people who have been renewed and reborn by His Grace—as instruments of that Grace in the world.

This is why the Church exists—to be the place where the message of God’s Grace in Jesus Christ is proclaimed and embodied by the power of the Holy Spirit through Word and Sacrament. Grace is the beginning of the Church. Peter denied Jesus 3 times, and then, after breakfast on the beach, the Risen Lord showed Peter Grace by letting him affirm 3 times that he loved Jesus. That is the ‘rock’ on which the Church was built: gracious favour for a fearful sinner. Grace is how Peter went from denying Christ to giving up his life to tell the world that Jesus rose from the dead and that there is new life for all who believe in Him. Everything about Church is about directing our attention and our hearts to this enabling word. From the architecture to the liturgy, the music to the stained glass, the bread and wine to the preached word—it is Grace, Grace, Grace. Because that is the only thing that makes the Church unique! Without Grace, we would simply be an historical society, a concert hall, a social services provider, or a community-building organisation. These are all aspects of Church life, but they must stem from and move towards God’s Grace. Sadly, churches that lose sight of this tend to become dominated by one of those aspects, to the detriment of the Good News of God’s Grace. When leadership puts the cart before the horse, we get off track, fast. No church is immune to this, which is why we must stay close to Grace. When we look at the plank in our own eye, when we recognise our continual need for God’s Grace like the tax collector, and when we humbly pray, ‘Lord, I believe; help my unbelief’, then we can, indeed, by God’s Grace, be a ‘place of God’s grace, welcoming all, following Christ and changing lives in the heart of Hong Kong.’

