

Sermon preached at Gisborne, 21 February, 2021

Genesis 9:8-17; Mark 1:9-15

Lord God, help us to know your ways; teach us your paths. Lead us in your truth, and teach us, for you are the God of our salvation; for you, we wait all day long. Through Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Grace is one of the things that makes Christianity unique among other religions. It is often said to be a gift from God. The gifts we receive from others are often reciprocal. As we receive gifts from friends or family, we may feel like doing the same thing when it comes to their special day to celebrate. In general, gifts may help people maintain their relationships with other people by giving and taking them. Gifts are also used as bribery to achieve one's own purpose. The grace of God, however, as a gift doesn't belong to this category. First, it doesn't involve human wills or desire, but God's. The grace of God is given freely without our merits. So we cannot pay it back like we can do to other people. Second, it is about eternal life which the world cannot give to us. So we'll think about grace through a story and scripture readings.

(We listen to the song 'Why me, Lord' by Kris Kristofferson)

Do you know who he is? He is an American singer-songwriter and actor, Kris Kristofferson. *Why me?* is the title of the song by him in 1970s. As you heard, the first verse of the song goes like this.

Why me, Lord, what have I ever done. To deserve even one, Of the pleasures I've known.

Tell me, Lord, what did I ever do that was worth loving you, Or the kindness you've shown.

*Lord help me Jesus, I've wasted it so, Help me Jesus I know what I am, Now that I know that I've needed you so, Help me Jesus, my soul's in your hand.*¹

Kris Kristofferson was a man of success in every aspect of life. Born in Texas and raised in a military family, he was a Golden Gloves boxer, who studied creative writing at Pomona College in California. After graduating from the college, he earned a Rhodes scholarship to study literature at Oxford, where he boxed, played rugby and continued to write songs. After graduating from Oxford, Kristofferson served in the army as an Airborne Ranger helicopter pilot and achieved the rank of Captain. He was not only a successful singer-songwriter who was the three-time Grammy winner with 29 albums, but he was also a successful film actor who has acted in more than 70 films. He had money, fame, love and nearly everything in his life. Even so, he had his moments like anybody else.

One Sunday morning, when he went with friends to a church service, where he was moved by Larry Gatlin's song "Help me." He had never thought of needing help, but he was at a low point in his life at that time.

¹ Verse 2. Tell me, Lord, if you think there's away, I can try to repay
All I've taken from you, Maybe Lord, I can show someone else, What I've been through myself
on my way back to you.

So when the pastor asked the congregation, “Is anybody feeling lost?” “Up goes my hand,” Kristofferson says. The pastor then asked, “Are you ready to accept Christ: Kneel down there.” “I’m kneeling there,” Kristofferson continues, “...and I carry a big load of guilt around...and I was just out of control, crying. It was a release. It really shook me up.” Then he wrote this song, “Why me?” based on his personal experience with Jesus. The song, which is also known, “why me, Lord?” reached on No. one Billboard Chart in July 1973 and one of the long runs (19 weeks) in the top 40. On top of his worldly success, he even met Jesus personally and wrote this beautiful song which was loved by many. His experience of this spiritual moment seems to be a sheer gift from God, indeed. Is so, what scripture says about grace, then?

In Mark’s passage in 1:9-15, Jesus himself is the grace of God. As the word became flesh, Jesus went through the baptism like anybody else, He tempted by Satan. Eventually, he began the Galilean Ministry by following the Father’s will. In all three passages, we can find grace in the work of the Spirit. In Jesus’ baptism, we see the descending of the Holy Spirit on Jesus, which also reveals his identity as the Son of God. Next, the same Holy Spirit is also a driving force that leads Jesus to the wilderness to be tempted by Satan for forty days.²

In Mark, the focus is on Jesus, not on the Temptation. Despite the presence of wild beasts in such a hostile environment and his hunger and fatigue, Jesus is not overthrown by Satan. Together with the Galilean ministry, Jesus’ Baptism and the Temptation worked together to bring the beginning – crucifixion and resurrection. We believers will also experience these things in the course of our lives. As Jesus was kept by the grace of God, and so are we.

In the book of Noah, we also see the grace of God. The context for this story begins with Genesis 3, which introduces sin by telling of the Fall. In chapter 4, we read the murder of Abel by his brother Cain. Chapter 5 lays the groundwork for Noah’s story by providing his genealogy, and chapter 6 tells of the wickedness of the people of the world and God’s determination to destroy humanity. Even so, in Genesis 6:8, it reads: ‘But Noah found *favour* in the sight of the Lord.’³ The word ‘favour’(*chen* חֵן) which is also translated as ‘grace’ was not earned by Noah, but it was given by God. Even so, Noah responded to this grace by building the ark in the desert for about 120 years. More importantly, he had to endure all the mockeries by people who might have thought him gone crazy. Finally the flood came, and the rain fell on the earth for 40 days, and forty nights. When the rain had finally stopped, God initiated the covenant. The sign of this covenant was God’s bow in the clouds. The bow is for a battle, and when it is hung up, it means the person is to retire from battle. God hung up his bow in the clouds and promised that there would be no more destruction by the flood. Instead, God would prepare a way once for all to deal with the sin and brokenness of the world.

In our storytime, we heard a story about the lion and the mouse by Aesop. The question was, what is grace in the story, if there is any. The lion’s generous gesture may have an element of grace, and the response of

² The number forty calls to mind several important biblical stories, such as the duration of the flood (Genesis 7:4, 12, 17), the wilderness years of Israel (Exodus 16:35), and the flight of Elijah (1 Kings 19:4-8).

³ Genesis 6:8 וַיִּחַן נֹחַ בְּעֵינֵי יְהוָה: פ

the mouse to this can also be grace. One of the morals of this story is that 'kind deeds always get rewarded.' But the grace of God is working in a different dimension. For example, had the lion been starving, he wouldn't let the mouse go unharmed. Had the mouse not been close enough to the lion, he couldn't come to the rescue of the lion. Had the lion and the mouse not possessed such instincts and skills, the story may have become something else, and so on.

For Kris Kristofferson, that particular moment in that particular church with that particular hymn have been the grace of God. What about us? Among billions of people living in the world, what brings us here in this particular church today? While we listen to Christofferson's conversion story, Jesus' baptism, the Temptation, and the beginning of the Galilean ministry, and the flood and all, indeed, the grace of God is overflowing in and around us. We pray to God with hope that grace will be upon others too so that they will receive the life in the eternal. Amen