

Standing on the Promise of the Cross

Our readings today take us from the prophecy of the cross in Isaiah, through the purpose of the cross explained in the letter to the Colossians, to Christ's final words upon the cross, "tetelestai", it is finished.

The cross is central to our faith as Christians. For some, it is the crucifix, the understanding of Christ's suffering and death upon the cross for our sins. For others, it is the empty cross, the understanding of resurrection and new life. However, whichever one is the more important to you or whether you embrace both the unconditional love of Christ upon the cross and the victory over death of the empty cross, the promises that are held for all of us within that symbol, are ones that we can all stand upon.

For me these promises can all be summed up in the words that we often say at the end of a service and which we will be saying tonight:

"May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you now and always."

So let us take a closer look at what we are actually saying and how it contains the promise of the cross.

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ

There are a number of definitions in the dictionary for the word "grace". The one I particularly like talks about grace as unmerited love and favour. I certainly know that in my life I haven't done much to merit God's love and favour, and yet, I can't deny that I have known both God's love and favour in my life.

In Luke 23 we hear the story of the thieves who were on the crosses either side of Christ. We are told that one of the thieves taunts Jesus, but the other, recognises Jesus for who he is. Jesus tells that thief in verse 43 "today you will be with me in paradise." Here is a man who accepts that he has not lived the sort of life that would endear him to God and yet Jesus tells him that all will be well.

Here is a man who had been excluded from society, who had been condemned to suffer a humiliating death on the cross, and yet Jesus tells him that he is no longer excluded, that he is loved, that he has a home, that he belongs.

The cross tells us that through the grace of Christ we all receive the promise of salvation, the promise of inclusion, the promise of love.

So let us take a closer look at the next line that we say:

the love of God

"Love" is talked about all the time and we use it in so many different ways. But what do we mean by "the love of God"? We are told that God loves us unconditionally, and yet we know that doesn't mean that God doesn't get angry with us, doesn't discipline us, and most certainly doesn't always do what we want. We're also told that God loves us like a parent, and

Jesus certainly modelled a parent-child relationship throughout his time on earth, calling God “Abba”. And yet at a time when Jesus needed God, his Abba, the most, when he was nailed to that cross, gasping for breath, through the pain he cries out, “Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?” (Which means “my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”). Matthew 27:46

At a time when Jesus needed to be completely embraced by the love of God it seems to us that he has been totally abandoned. Why else would he cry out ‘why have you forsaken me?’ But actually, what Jesus was doing is quoting from Psalm 22. By quoting the first line of this Psalm he’s telling people remember that Psalm. Psalm 22 goes on to describe all the ways in which Jesus suffered upon the cross, even down to how dry his mouth was and how lots would be cast for his garments. But, when we get to verse 24 we hear “for God has not despised or scorned the suffering of the afflicted one; God has not hidden God’s face from him but has listened to his cry for help.”

Many of the followers who saw Jesus on the cross thought that the God that he talked about amounted to nothing, that all his claims of being the Messiah, the son of God, were no more than pie in the sky. But even in that worst of moments Jesus is telling us how God never abandons us, that God’s love surrounds us, and embraces us, in all situations, at all times. That no matter who we are we are not despised or scorned, that God listens to our cries and is with us in our suffering.

The cross tells us that through the love of God we all receive the promise of never being abandoned, never being alone.

That brings us to the next part.

The fellowship of the Holy Spirit

Again I turned to the dictionary, this time to see what it had to say about the word “fellowship”. And again, I found a lot of things that didn’t seem to really apply in this situation, but, amongst the synonyms that were listed I came across, “companionship”, “intimacy”, “togetherness”.

I started to think, how do we have companionship, intimacy, togetherness, with the Holy Spirit? And then it dawned on me, it doesn’t say fellowship **with** the Holy Spirit, but fellowship **of** the Holy Spirit.

What we are really talking about is the presence of the Holy Spirit in all our relationships so that we can experience companionship, intimacy, and togetherness, in the same way that Christ, God, and the Holy Spirit experience these things as the triune God.

Fellowship was really important to Jesus. Not only did he constantly invite those who had been excluded by others into his fellowship but he also relied on the fellowship of those around him, especially at the most important times in his life. We hear in the story of the Transfiguration how he took two of his closest friends with him and again in the garden of Gethsemane, when he was trying to come to terms with what the future held for him, as intimate a moment as this was between him and God, he still needed his friends close by.

In John 19:26 – 27 we hear how Jesus looked down from the cross and saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved. He knew that they would now be alone, and that they would need someone to be close to them, to share their grief with, someone that they could depend upon, and trust. So from the cross Jesus relinquishes his sonship of Mary, and passes it to John. He says “woman, here is your son,” and to John he says “here is your mother.” Verse 27 ends with “from that time on, this disciple took her into his home.” They had become family.

There are two things that have really touched me in this reading. The first is how once again Jesus honours women. He doesn't just think about John, and make sure that he has a family, he not only also speaks to Mary, he speaks to her first, addressing her needs before those of his disciples'. The second, is how he helps us to find or create communities where we can find companionship, intimacy, and togetherness. Through the leading, guiding, and sometimes great big boot up the rear end from the Holy Spirit, organisations like The Sibyls come into being to create the spaces and places that we need to develop kinship and fellowship.

The cross tells us that through the fellowship of the Holy Spirit we all receive the promise of family.

The cross offers us many promises. The promise of salvation, inclusion, love, never being abandoned or alone, and family. It all sounds wonderful, but as we all know, not all promises are kept.

In this short prayer the final line is, “be with you now and always”.

The good news is that we can say this with total conviction because these promises have been kept, are being kept, will be kept.

How do I know this? Because of Christ's final word upon the cross, “tetelestai”. “It is finished”.

So often this is understood to simply mean that Jesus was saying “that's it I'm gonna die now”. However, the truth is, that when a promissory note was paid, the one holding the note wrote “tetelestai” across it.

God held a promissory note that Jesus would pay the price for humanities redemption. It was on that cross that this promissory note was paid in full. Tetelestai!

Jesus was reporting that he had completed his mission and had paid the debt in full. Perhaps a better translation would simply be “done!”

We can stand on the promise of the cross for it has already been paid in full.

So, may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you now and always. Amen