

16 July 2017

Admission to Communion and fellowship



Readings:

- Romans 8:1-11
- Matthew 13:1-9, 18-

Today we celebrate with Anisa, Corinna, Colleen, George, Georgina, Isla and Keith as they are admitted to Holy Communion and with Justine as she formally makes the Church of England and this fellowship her spiritual home. It is such a joy to see so many embark on a new chapter in their Christian faith, especially as I have had the privilege of sharing with their stories of faith and seen them grow, in faith as they have attended this church and many have done the Alpha Course as well. They have all come from different backgrounds and lives, but all have in some way come into a new and living faith in Jesus Christ and want to live in this new faith and make a public statement of their faith with us today. The reason they are being admitted to Communion now is that we have planned that they will be confirmed at the big service in the Cathedral in November.

What is the Christian faith that they have committed themselves to? We heard Linda speak about it last week, in her sermon on Grace. Grace- God's unlimited favour towards us as human beings that in spite of our sins, he sent His own son to die for us, so that in Jesus Christ we can be forgiven, - ransomed healed restored forgiven- as the hymn says. **Ro 5:8 But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.** His grace does not count our sins against us, and we are to accept the free gift of God's grace

As the hymn says

**Just as I am, without one plea
But that Thy blood was shed for me,
And that Thou bid'st me come to Thee,
O Lamb of God, I come.**

**Just as I am, Thou wilt receive,
Wilt welcome, pardon, cleanse, relieve,
Because Thy promise I believe,
O Lamb of God, I come.**

**Just as I am, Thy love unknown
Has broken every barrier down;
Now to be Thine, yea, Thine alone,
O Lamb of God, I come.**

It is all of grace, all of the undeserved favour of God, and now we can stand before God, clothed in His righteousness alone, forgiven and cleansed from the memory of past sins, free of the guilt.

This is why our reading from Romans 8 says this:

1 There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

2 For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death.

Paul then goes on to explain that the law, cannot keep us in righteousness because as humans we cannot keep it, but because of Jesus Christ we are considered dead to the law and alive to Jesus Christ, and can now receive the Holy Spirit, who will lead us and guide us in the paths of righteousness.

10 But if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness.

11 If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you.

Great, we are now forgiven, under grace not law, but is that it? What about our future lives, can we sin, so that grace may increase? Or put another way, as we are now under grace, does it mean that we can continue in sin, to live just as we like? **Ro 6:2 By no means! How can we who died to sin go on living in it? says Paul in Romans 6.** If we live like this, then we are living in what the theologian Bonhoeffer said was 'Cheap Grace.', as Linda told us last week. We are, in effect throwing God's gift of grace back in His face. If one of our children had done something very wrong, such as stealing, the child would be forgiven, but what would we think if the child then said, because Mum and Dad forgave me, I can go on stealing? Would we tolerate this, By no means, as Paul says- we must make every effort to be free from sin, to out sin to death in our mortal bodies.

So the big question is - How should we live now as Christians. We are under grace, but we should try to grow in our faith, knowing that if we do sin, we have an advocate in Jesus, through whom we have been forgiven, but we try not to sin and instead do the things that please God.

Growing in faith is an agricultural or gardening image or metaphor, and so we turn to an agricultural parable of Jesus to help us – the parable of the sower.

The seed is freely sown and all can hear it, but for some seed it never reaches the soil but is eaten up, others grow among rocks but because their roots are weak they wither. Other grows among weeds and the weeds choke the growth, but other seed grows among good soil and produces a crop. Then Jesus explains the parable to his disciples – to those who want to learn:

The seed sown on the path is about those who hear the word and do not take it in – in one ear and out the other – those who cannot be bothered with it now. The devil takes the seed away. Thank God, that is not the case with us today, we are here wanting to hear God's word, and our candidates have responded to God's word. But, the warnings in this parable are not just for those who have not heard, but for those

who have heard, but do not continue in the word, and allow other things to get in the way, and we all need to take heed of this

Firstly, the seed sown among rocks- the seed takes root and starts to produce a crop- but there are no roots because rocks get in the way. This is about those who do not deal with big issues in their previous life- like resentment, bitterness, addictions, bad habits and behaviours, critical attitudes, sexual sin, love of money. They look on the outside as if they are normal Christians, but when trouble comes in the heat of the day they wither. This is why sometimes people who have made a Christian commitment fade away and we do not see them anymore. When troubles come it is an opportunity to show faith, but they think that having faith is a guarantee of problems going away. The number of people I know who have attended this church, and then something happened – either with a person or the vicar, and somehow the church let me down. Well, I will let you into a secret; the church will always let you down, because it is made up of imperfect people like you and me. Our faith is in the perfect Jesus Christ, not in the church as we see it today. We need to deal with the rocks and get rid of their influence in our Christian lives today.

Secondly the seed sown among the weeds. It grows and seems to be doing well, but then the weeds choke the growth – the weeds representing the troubles of life – the love of money, family demands, the demands to keep up with others- even good things like hobbies and interests, even – dare I say it – church activities. Our faith is in Jesus Christ, and if we put Him first, we will get the right perspective on life.

Mt 6:31 Therefore do not worry, saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear?' 32 For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. 33 But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. 34 "So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today.

A friend of ours has said "Sunday is our family day, we do not have time to go to Church – but what better day to come to church and thank God for your family. Some have interests that are on Sundays – and on occasions it is right to go to these – we are to be in the world- but if these are stopping us having fellowship, then we must put God first. Sometimes work demands that we must work on Sundays – yes, and this is necessary at times; but what effort do you make to make up for this – a friend of mine was a policeman and had to work some Sundays; he always tried to swap shifts, and his mates could get extra time payments, and always tried to go in the evening if he missed a morning – it is a question of priorities. Friends of ours had a caravan or motor home and went away weekends- yes that is fine but how can you have fellowship if you are not a regular member of a church and work out your faith with others? You are still a Christian, but you will not grow without fellowship with others and hearing the preached word of God and receiving the sacraments. And also, if we are so busy with church activities, and away a lot, or even so busy we do

not have time to listen or take it in, then we can find ourselves not growing. I am very, very grateful to those who teach in Sunday Schools, and sometimes miss the main sermon, but do you know that the sermon is often posted on the church website so you can read it later? If you cannot come on Sundays, then we have our Wednesday Morning Holy Communion, or there is the Alpha Course, or the housegroups you could join. Are you spending too much time watching television or on your computers, tablets or phones – they are very good and useful, but if they are getting in the way of reading your bible, fellowship, or normal relationships with other people, then perhaps you need to fast from them for a while to get your perspective back. It takes effort to recognise the weeds in our lives that prevent growth and to tackle them.

If we wonder why we do not grow in our faith, perhaps we need to take a good, long hard look at the way we spend our time, and how much of a priority we give to our faith in Jesus Christ. Please note I said faith in Jesus Christ, not commitment to St Andrew's church, that should flow out of the first not be an end in itself.

23 But as for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty."

In the comparable passage in Luke's gospel it says this **Lu 8:15 But as for that in the good soil, these are the ones who, when they hear the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patient endurance.**

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True gardening is not like Groundforce, Or Garden SOS, where they come in and change a garden in a day – it makes good television but it does not work like that. As Kipling once said,

**Our England is a garden, and such gardens are not made
By singing:- " Oh, how beautiful," and sitting in the shade
While better men than we go out and start their working lives
At grubbing weeds from gravel-paths with broken dinner-knives.**

And farming for crops is the same – it takes time and patient endurance, and good heart,- perseverance and keeping going, the hard work of sowing and digging up weeds and rocks so the seed can grow. And in the same way, the Christian faith is about hard work of dealing with things in our lives that prevent growth – rocks like resentment, addictions, unconfessed sin, greed, or worrying about life so much that we do not allow ourselves to grow – letting good things like family and hobbies and earning a living take over so they become, in effect idols we worship.

But to those who do make the effort of putting things right, they are the ones who produce a crop for the kingdom. It is all of Grace, because it is God at work in us, but we must be willing to co-operate with God and deal with things that prevent growth.

So today we thank God for Anisa, Corinna, Colleen, George, Georgina, Isla and Keith as they are admitted to Holy Communion and with Justine as she formally makes St Andrew's her spiritual home. It is grace that has led you thus far, and grace will lead you home. But we must give God a chance, and allow Him to work on us, so that we can bear fruit for His Kingdom and glorify His name, and then at the last we hope to hear those wonderful words.

Well done, good and trustworthy servant; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.'