

2 COR 13.13: A TRINITARIAN BENEDICTION

[Chelmsford 7 June 2009]

In the church calendar today is Trinity Sunday.

Unlike other Christian Festivals such as Christmas, Easter, and Pentecost, which celebrate historical events, on Trinity Sunday we celebrate the truth that God can be known as Father, Son and Holy Spirit – he is three in one, and one in three.

In the words of the Athanasian Creed:

*We worship one God in trinity,
and trinity in unity;
neither confusing the persons
nor dividing the nature of God.
For there is one person of the Father,
another of the Son,
and another of the Holy Spirit;
but the Godhead of the Father,
of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit is all one –
the glory equal,
the majesty co-eternal;
what the Father is, so is the Son,
and so is the Holy Spirit.*

Gosh, are you any wiser? I am reminded of the little girl, who rushed in from school and said to her mother: “*Mummy, Mummy, today we learned all about the Blessed Trinity*”. “*Yes, dear*”, replied her mother, “*and what did you learn?*”. “*Well*”, the little girl replied, “*there is the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Ghost*” – she paused dramatically – and “*Amen isn’t anybody*”.

As I have mentioned in my article in *Connect*, the doctrine of the Trinity arose not from philosophical speculation, but from the church’s experience of Jesus.

For in Jesus Christians discovered that they had encountered God himself – and in the presence of the Spirit in their midst they experienced again the presence of Jesus.

Well, enough of abstract theology. Let me turn to what is probably the best-known verse in the Bible – which is? John 3.16? Psalm 23?

No, the best known verse is the prayer found in 2 Cor 13.13! “**The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all**”.

Today I am embarking on a short series of five sermons focussing on five different blessings or benedictions found in the Bible.

On this Trinity Sunday we shall focus on this Trinitarian blessing.

1. THE GRACE OF THE LORD JESUS BE WITH YOU

What is grace? Perhaps an incident from my past will illustrate what it is not. When I was a boy I learnt to play the piano. This involved learning to read music. To help me read music I was taught all sorts of mnemonics. E.g.

- to remember the notes between the lines I had to say to myself "*All Cows Eat Grass*".
- to remember the notes on the lines I had to say to myself "*Every Good Boy Deserves Favour*".

What's more, our piano teacher used to put some of these mnemonics into practise. If we had done our piano practise, then she would give us a sweet as a reward - she believed that good boys deserved favour.

But God is the very reverse of my piano teacher.

God favours not only the good, but also the not to good.

God favours people like you and me. Grace is God's undeserved favour.

Grace is God's loving-kindness to the undeserving.

To quote one preacher: "*Into a world in which there is no such thing as a free lunch, where everyone expects – and hopes – to get what they deserve, comes the almost incomprehensibly free gift of God, offered unconditionally to us all*" (Brian Edgar 37)

i. God's grace we see above all in the life and death of Jesus.

In this very letter Paul had written: "**You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ; rich as he was, he made himself poor for your sake, in order to make you rich by means of his poverty**" (2 Cor 8.9).

When God sent his Son into this world to live and die for you and for me he was being gracious beyond measure. There was no reason for God to love us so.

As a child in Sunday School I was taught that GRACE is spelt: "***God's Riches At Christ's Expense***". God in his grace offers you & me forgiveness/ new life - gifts which were costly beyond to him, but gifts which are free to you and to me.

When we say the Grace together we are praying that each one of us may ***experience afresh the grace of the Lord Jesus afresh in our lives.***

If the truth be told, each one of us needs to know the grace of God again and again in our lives. For we are sinful men and women.

In spite of all our best endeavours we fail God and we fail one another.

To know the grace of God in our lives is to know again his forgiveness - it is to know that however undeserving we may be, he accepts us as we are - in Jesus there is always a new beginning.

ii. God's continuing grace

But I wonder whether there is more to the Grace than simply grace seen in the Crucified Christ? My mind goes to another passage in 2 Cor, where Paul speaks of God's grace.

In 2 Cor 12 Paul speaks of an occasion when the Lord said to him: "**My grace is all you need, for my power is greatest when you are weak**" (2 Cor 12.9).

Paul at the time was very conscious of his limitations - he was finding it difficult to cope with his "**thorn in his flesh**" (NRSV) or what GNB calls "**a painful physical ailment**".

He longed for God to remove this particular difficulty in his life.

Three times he prayed that the Lord would set him free from this particular aggravation. But instead the Lord replied: "**My grace is all you need**" (GNB) - "**My grace is sufficient for you**" (NRSV)

When we say the Grace together we are praying that not only will our brothers & sisters know the joy of being forgiven, but also that they will *know the strength that God alone can give*.

Many people shut their eyes when they say the Grace - it becomes almost a private prayer.

I prefer to keep my eyes open - to look at people and as I look at them to be reminded of their needs

- I see some of my brothers/sisters finding it difficult to cope with the demands of life
- I see parents with difficult children, children with difficult parents
- I see people under pressure at work - or because they have no work
- I see pain written large in this face or that face

Into these situations I pray God's blessing. May the grace of the Lord Jesus be yours.

2. THE LOVE OF GOD BE WITH YOU

I find it sad that in the English language the term "*act of God*" refers to some uncontrollable natural event.

E.g. an earthquake or a volcanic eruption can be described as an act of God.

Some insurance policies cover everything bar "acts of God".

God it seems is to be equated with havoc and destruction.

What a false picture this is of God – or at least of the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. For in Jesus we have discovered that God is not *a God of destruction, but a God of love*. God is love. Love is not part of his being – it is the essence of his being.

This love comes to clearest expression in the sending of his Son to be our Saviour. Rom 5.8: "**God has shown us how much he loves us – it was while we were still sinners that Christ died for us**".

The Cross demonstrates for all to see that God is love.

Yes, at times life does give nasty knocks.

Many of us here have experienced the pain of suffering or the grief of bereavement.

We have known the heart-break of broken dreams and the anguish of disillusionment.

We have wondered - and perhaps still wonder - why God has allowed our lives to take the shape they have. We have cried aloud to God on many an occasion, "*Why God, why?*" - but received no answer.

Yes, there are many unanswered questions represented in this congregation..

Yet amidst all life's uncertainties, of one thing we can be certain - *we can be certain*

that God is love. For “**God has shown how much he loves us**” – or as NRSV puts it, “**God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us**”. If we are tempted to doubt his love, we need only look to the Cross - the Cross resolves all doubt.

i. See - God loves you

What then does it mean to say the Grace? In the first place it means we are praying that our brothers & sisters may gain a renewed confidence in the love of God.

To those whose wounds are raw, for whom the light has gone out of life, for whom pain and hurt are uppermost, we pray that they may know the balm of God's love.

"May the love of God be yours".

See there on the Cross that God loves you - see there amidst the pain & the darkness of the Cross love in tangible form.

ii. Experience God's love for you

But there is more to the Grace than that.

To say "the love of God be with you" is not just to point a sufferer back to the past, but rather to pray that they know God's love in the present.

The love of God which came to full expression of the Cross of Calvary may also be experienced in the here and now.

My mind goes to another passage in Romans - Rom 8. Paul there speaks of troubles he had experienced - of hardship, distress, persecution, famine -but he refuses to allow these troubles to have the last word. **"I am certain that There is nothing in all creation, that will ever be able to separate us from the love of God which is ours through Christ Jesus our Lord"**.

God's love seen in Jesus is an *ongoing present love*.

To pray that God's love be yours is to pray that in the here & now our brothers/sisters may know God's love.

It is a universal truth that everyone wants and needs to be loved.

Sadly, many people do not feel loved – and as a result their lives are blighted by feelings of insecurity and anxiety.

But the good news is that while parents may fail us, God does not.

God loves us – he loves you, he loves me.

The Swiss psychiatrist Paul Tournier spoke out of his own experience when he said: “*I am convinced that nine out of ten persons seeing a psychiatrist do not need one. They need somebody who will love them with God’s love... and they will get well*”.

As we say the Grace together, we say “May you experience God’s love for you today”

3. THE FELLOWSHIP OF THE HOLY SPIRIT BE WITH YOU

So far, so good. However, the meaning of this final phrase is less clear.

What is the fellowship of the Holy Spirit?

I won't trouble you with the abstruse debate over grammar - suffice it to say the debate centres round the question: is Paul talking about fellowship with the Holy Spirit or fellowship created by the Holy Spirit?

i. Know fellowship with the Holy Spirit

If Paul has in mind fellowship with the Holy Spirit, then he is saying, 'May you know the friendship God's Spirit offers'.

Certainly this is the way Eugene Peterson understands the phrase in his NT translation: "*The intimate friendship of the Holy Spirit be with you all*".

Jesus in the Upper Room described the Holy Spirit as the Helper, the Comforter, the Encourager, the one who draws alongside us in our need.

The clear implication of Jesus' teaching is that the Spirit is the presence of Jesus in his absence.

The Apostle Paul in Rom 8 says the Spirit comes to us to help us in our weakness.

At the beginning of 2 Corinthians he describes the Spirit as God's "mark of ownership" (1.21).

May the fellowship of this Holy Spirit be yours.

May you know the strengthening, comforting, encouraging presence of God in your life.

May you know the security which God gives us through his Spirit

Yes, in this sense may you know the fellowship of the Holy Spirit.

ii. Experience the fellowship created by the Holy Spirit

However, although both translations are possible, I have little doubt that in the context in which he was writing, Paul particularly had in mind the fellowship which the Spirit creates.

The Holy Spirit is the one who creates unity - he it is who makes real not only our relationship with God, but our relationship one with the other.

One of the great privileges of being a Christian is that when we are baptised, we are baptised by the Spirit into the body of Christ, the church (1 Cor 12.12).

Those who know God's love, who have the grace of Christ in their bloodstream, have been born again by the Spirit of God into the greatest of families, in which differences of class, gender, and race are transcended.

The fellowship which Christians enjoy with one another is an amazing experience.

Sadly, however, sometimes things go wrong.

Sometimes the local expression of this family becomes dysfunctional.

This was certainly true at Corinth. If ever there was a problem church, it was Corinth.

Their life together in the Spirit was marred by all kinds of theological & social divisions.

Right at the beginning of his 1st letter Paul had written: "**I appeal to all of you, my brothers & sisters, to agree in what you say, so that there will be no divisions among you. Be completely united with only one thought & one purpose**" (1 Cor 1.10).

Similarly here almost at the end of 2 Corinthians he writes: "**Agree with one another; live in peace**" (13.11).

It was perhaps *the divisions at Corinth which caused Paul to end with this benediction.*

- With the needs of a divided church in mind he prayed that they might know the love of God, not just within their own individual lives, but also within their life together.
- Likewise he went on to pray that they might experience the fellowship of the Spirit within their midst.

Thank God the divisions of Corinth are not present in Chelmsford.

We are a happy and united fellowship.

But we can never take our fellowship for granted.

So, when we say the Grace together, we say, "May the Holy Spirit create and sustain true fellowship here in our church".

Yes, "May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all"