

APPLICATIONS ARE OPEN

Pentecost 4 Year B

1 Sam 17:(1a,4-11,19-23),32-49; Ps. 9:9-20; 2 Cor. 6:1-13; Mk. 4:35-41 Gladstone 20/06/2021

If you were trying to recruit someone to work for your organization or your company, or if you were attempting to convince someone to attend your school or your church, or even if you were writing a church profile to attract a new minister, you would want to paint as positive a picture as possible, right? You'd tell them about all the good points and advantages of being a part of your group or your church, and you'd probably downplay anything that would be considered negative. I've never read a church profile that wasn't glowing in its positivity, with almost no negatives at all—they're usually called challenges. The same goes for most company profiles. The negatives are not something we usually want to advertise.

You certainly would NOT say something like this: "We'd really like you to work for us, but although we pay decently, you need to be aware that we will overwork you every day and none of your work will be appreciated. You'll have no clue what you are doing most of the time, and the tools and resources you need to do your job will be painful and costly. But if you let us misuse you, you can be content knowing that you'll be making our company a lot of money—not that you'll see much of it, of course." Mmm!

When I was at the tender age of only 20, I went to work for the church at a mission on Elcho Island, off the top of Arnhem Land (look it up on google maps when you get home). When I arrived, the person who was to be my "boss", for want of a better word, said, "You don't have to be crazy to work here, but it does help." That pretty much sums up any kind of Christian ministry. And certainly some of the stuff I've had to deal with over the last 25 years of ministry, was definitely *not* in the brochure.

If we were confronted with a sales pitch like the one I just mentioned, most of us would struggle to offer a polite, "Thanks but no thanks," find the nearest exit, and put our application in somewhere else. And yet, that is exactly how Paul invites his readers and hearers in Corinth into the realities of ministry. Paul's words imply that if that isn't something we can get excited about, then maybe we have received the grace of God in vain.

After discussing in the previous chapter the ministry of reconciliation with which Paul and his fellow apostles—and, in truth, all Christians—have been entrusted, Paul now turns his attention to how that affects his Corinthian readers. He makes that shift with a remarkable statement: "*As we work together with him,[i.e. God] we urge you also not to*

accept the grace of God in vain." Now, two things about that statement ought to strike us right away. First, Paul talks as though the reception of God's grace is an active rather than a passive reality. Second, it would appear that one can receive that grace in a way that doesn't do any good—a way that is "for nothing" or "in vain."

By offering an encouragement to his Corinthian readers to receive God's grace, Paul reveals that the reception of this grace is not automatic. It's not something that happens to us without any involvement or contribution on our part. For example, consider how ridiculous it would be for someone to say, "I encourage you to make sure your heart is beating," (you'll know if it's not) or "I urge you to stay connected to the Earth by gravity." If we have no control over the action, encouraging us to let it happen is, indeed, quite useless. If you fall off a ladder, gravity will happen whether you want it to or not.

Apparently, for Paul, grace does not operate in some kind of automatic way. God *offers* grace for us to take hold of and act upon. In fact, Paul's digression into Isaiah 49:8 here draws the Corinthians' attention to the fact that God has already done *his* work. "*At an acceptable time I have listened to you, and on a day of salvation I have helped you.*"

Grace, favour and help have already been offered. In light of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, this salvation has already come. Now, indeed, is the time. But God's accomplishment of his purposes doesn't mean that believers don't need to do anything—as if God's action makes our action unnecessary. Rather, what Paul is saying to the Corinthians, is that because God *has* acted, it is now their turn to act. What Paul is encouraging them to do is to receive God's grace—actively and intentionally—and to do that in a way that doesn't look "empty-handed," to use the literal meaning of Paul's word here.

What, then, would it mean to receive God's grace "empty-handedly", "for nothing," "in vain"? We often think of grace as the work of God that accomplishes our salvation—the remedy for sin—God's positive disposition that restores us to God's favour. All of that is true, of course, but if that's all there were to grace, it would be hard to imagine how a person could receive that "in vain," in the sense of it not doing any good. As I noted earlier, if grace were simply about God doing his work automatically, then there would be no need to receive it and so no way to receive it empty-handedly or "in vain."

Instead, Paul invites us to imagine the dimensions of grace that are the work of God inside of *us*, rather than those dimensions that refer only to God's work on our behalf. If we are to receive God's grace actively, then there is something *we* must do, something that grace empowers us to do. To receive that grace in vain, then, would be to not allow that grace

to accomplish its work within us—to not do what we now have been empowered to do. What then is that?

Well, without any sort of transition, Paul turns quickly from affirming that now is the time of salvation to talking about ministry. He tells the Corinthians that he and his fellow apostles do not put any stumbling blocks or opportunities for offense in front of people, so that there is no opportunity for the ministry to be discredited. Rather than get upset that people get offended at things, Paul works to keep offense at the minimum. “How can he do that?” one might ask. Simple. Paul has not received the grace of God in vain. Paul has let God’s overwhelming love and favour turn him into a person who is passionate about sharing that overwhelming love and favour—a person who doesn’t have time to worry about himself. In every way (or on every occasion), Paul and his fellow workers display what it means to be a minister or a servant of that grace.

Paul then launches into a long narrative of what his ministry looks like. And it’s not all sunshine and roses. Rather it is (in the words of Paul):

...through great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, ⁵beatings, imprisonments, riots, labours, sleepless nights, hunger; ⁶by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, ⁷truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; ⁸in honour and dishonour, in ill repute and good repute. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; ⁹as unknown, and yet are well known; as dying, and see—we are alive; as punished, and yet not killed; ¹⁰as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything. (2 Cor. 4b-10)

In all this, Paul offers himself and his companions as examples of how God’s grace is actively received in ways that are not empty, not in vain. It turns out, then, that the only way to receive grace in a way that isn’t emptied of its significance, is to empty oneself instead. Paul has endured many different kinds of trials and difficulties, all to make sure that God’s grace is proclaimed and God’s salvation in Christ known. Certainly, there are times of honour that balance the times of dishonour, times of praise that balance the times of slander, but Paul isn’t simply enduring the bad times so that he can enjoy the good ones.

...

Paul understands that, just as it was for Jesus, his endurance of these hardships is the very way in which God’s grace is seen for what it is. Normal people, ordinary people, people who live to advance themselves in this world simply do not act like Paul and his companions have acted. People who lack God’s grace are generally out for themselves—work according to their own selfish agendas—but Paul and his fellow workers are out for

others. They are not full of *themselves* anymore. Because of God's salvation, they are full of *grace* instead. Because of God's grace, they have become very conspicuous, very prominent, and that makes them embrace the hardships and poverty as the very way in which God is blessing and enriching their lives.

Unfortunately, as you continue to read through this letter, you will notice that Paul's appeal didn't work—at least not immediately. By the end of this letter, Paul seems to be fighting the same battle with his critics. In fact, the tone of hostility seems to have risen. And that's a realistic reminder that success in ministry comes not first of all and not finally from our best efforts, but from the grace of God.

Paul closes this section by appealing once again to the Corinthians to open up their lives to this kind of grace. Paul has put everything out there. He has vulnerably and authentically shared his heart. Now he appeals to the Corinthians to do that same, to not shut up their hearts but to open them up to the full measure of God's grace. He wants them to act in ways that embrace the hardship rather than in ways that promote themselves. Once again, he is essentially inviting them not to receive the grace of God in vain. For the Corinthians, that meant accepting Paul's work and joining him in it.

What might that mean for us today? What are the stumbling blocks to authentic Christian ministry as Paul has described it? Well, Paul alludes to three, here.

First, Christians ought to maintain a sense of urgency. If our lives and our teaching do not urge people to take the gospel seriously, then we have presented a stumbling block. Second, the Christian's love must not be restricted. If our love has to be earned, and is withheld for any number of reasons—if our love isn't radical and genuine—then we have placed another stumbling block before people. The love that ought to be apparent in the Christian community is one that takes no regard for its own advantage, that no longer views anybody "according to the flesh," And third, we must not dilute the gospel. We must not give the impression that righteousness and wickedness can join together. Each of these three activities has the effect of diminishing the gospel. If we fall into them, we are failing in our role as ambassadors of the good news—and God's grace will be in vain.

This will take a lot of courage, but, as Paul said, we don't want our churches to "receive the grace of God in vain." May the grace that we receive, both as individuals and the church not be in vain but bear much fruit for God's kingdom. Are you willing to take up the offer? Applications are open.

To him be all glory, honour, majesty and praise. Amen.