**THE GRACE MM O/L**

**We’ve got a very brief reading today, one that, I suspect, you all know well:**

**2 Cor. 13:14** ***May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.***

**These are Paul’s last recorded words to his dearly beloved “children” in Corinth. He’s already bidden them goodbye in v. 11, using a word that also means *rejoice* and we wondered before how we can *rejoice* in separation; he’d also prayed that they might be *perfect* or *complete* in v. 9 and we’d marvelled that he would even *think* that such a thing could be possible. And then he prays this prayer in v. 14 and we get a glimpse of the resources Paul wants the Corinthians – and us – to draw on – and we begin to understand just what might be possible if it is answered.**

**Back at the beginning of the epistle, he’d blessed them with *Grace and peace (1:2)* and, here, at the end of the epistle, he prays the same thing: *peace….[and] grace (vv. 11, 14).* So the whole epistle, with all its episodes and excursions and its acknowledgements of Christian frailty and confusion is bracketed by God’s grace and peace, peace and grace. I hope that’s a comfort for you: the Christian life is rarely placid and we are beset with many discouragements both within and without, but may *our* lives be bracketed by that same divine grace and peace. Because this is a universal message and not just for the Corinthians: have a look at the way Paul ends his epistles to the Galatians (6:16,18) and the Ephesians (6:23-4). What does he pray for? Grace and peace. If we want to know that peace in our separation, it comes from knowing that God’s grace is upon *both* parties. That’s why his words have been adopted by Christians everywhere. We often end *our* services with this prayer even though we’re far from Corinth in time, space and culture.**

**Did you noticed that there are four persons mentioned in the prayer?**

* **The Lord Jesus Christ;**
* **God;**
* **The Holy Spirit; and**
* ***You* (although that’s *you* plural, so, actually, countless multitudes are included).**

**Did you get that? Paul is praying for *you* and he knows what your need is, so he doesn’t just pray a vague prayer in the direction of some distant deity (and there were plenty of those in Corinth to choose from!), he invokes all the power and personality of the blessed Holy Trinity to aid *you*! And, as this is the only such trinitarian blessing in the New Testament, we’d better pay attention – it must be important!**

**Of course, you won’t find the word *trinity* mentioned by Paul or anyone else in the Bible, but the Trinity is most definitely there – and there from the beginning, chapter 1. Because, *In the beginning, God made the heavens and the earth…*.*and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters* declares the first two verses of the Bible. Twenty-four verses later, we find God communing with Himself in the *plural* as He contemplates the pinnacle of His creation, us, mankind *– Let us make mankind in our image (Gen. 1:26)* and Paul tells us in Colossians that Jesus *is the image of the invisible God (1:15),* so it’s His divine image we’re made in from the beginning*.***

**Isaiah foresaw the Trinity with his Christmas prophecy, *Unto us a child is born….And he will be called…. Mighty God.* And he even names the three Persons of that Trinity: *Wonderful Counsellor* (that’s the Spirit (Jn. 15:26))….*Everlasting Father* (Father God (Mt. 6:9), of course)and *Prince of Peace* (Jesus, the King’s Son, the Prince) *(Is. 9:6).***

**And didn’t Jesus Himself tell us to baptise people *in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit (Mt. 28:19)*? I hope *you’ve* been baptised - if you have, you were baptised into all the resources of the Holy Trinity, the same Holy Trinity Paul is praying to bless you now! Do you see why it’s reasonable for him to pray for *perfection* when coupled with such a trinitarian blessing?**

**But, as ever, his prayer reveals that Paul is a realist. Because he knows that, if we’re to make any progress, we’ll need Jesus’s *grace*. Recently Tim challenged us to define grace without resorting to the famous acronym, God’s Riches At Christ’s Expense. *God’s* riches….but, here, as in ch. 1, he ascribes grace *specifically* to *Jesus* rather than *generally* to *God*. Well, of course he does! Jesus is the *expression* of God’s grace. If ever you want to know the extent of God’s grace, think of Jesus and His cross. Isn’t the cross *vertical,* connecting heaven to earth? That’s grace because, back in Eden, the earth had rejected heaven. The vertical cross reconnects us, by grace. But Jesus’ cross is also *horizontal*, stretching His arms out to their fullest extent. That’s grace, because He stretched them out wide as if to say, *Come to me….*and….*I will never turn away anyone who* [does] *(Jn. 6:37).* Oh, we can *aim for perfection* because we can have that blessed assurance that, even when we fail, His grace is sufficient for all of us (2 Cor. 12:9).**

**But we’ll also need *the love of God.* That’s the love we’ll need to show to each other if we want to *aim for perfection.* Now, thank God for human love, yes? But have you noticed that human love – your love, my love, our love – is limited? It has its favourites and, even towards its favourites, can become exhausted. We’re very good at falling *in* love, but we’re also very good at falling *out of* love, too, aren’t we? Because *our* love draws from a very limited reservoir. But God’s love? How did the psalmist put it? *Give thanks to the LORD for he is good, his love endures forever (Ps. 118:1). His* love emanates from His *goodness*: His reservoir, therefore, is inexhaustible and eternal. If we’re truly *aim[ing] for perfection, that’s* the love we’ll need.**

**But we’ll also need *fellowship –* that begins with the fellowship of the *Church*, of course. After all, Paul was writing to *the church….in Corinth (1:1).* And there’s the problem – you see, the church is made up of people, other people. I think I could be pretty much a perfect Christian already if it weren’t for all those other people - and you may well feel the same way, too! That’s why, although the whole context of the epistle is about Christians living together in fellowship, Paul’s final and unique blessing on those pesky Corinthian Christians, his final *prayer* for them, is that they – and we – might also enjoy *the* *fellowship of the Holy Spirit.* Because, yes, we need *the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ*, which is the expression of the *love of God*, but, without *the fellowship of the Holy Spirit*, it’s all just doctrine. With the Spirit, it becomes *personal* and we can put it into practice*.* And, if *I’m* in fellowship with the Holy Spirit and *you’re* in fellowship with the Holy Spirit, we *must be* in fellowship with each other! That’s how Paul could rejoice even though he was leaving them and that’s how we can rejoice even though we be apart.**

**But it’s not automatic – that’s why it’s a prayer that these experiences might be *with* us all. He teaches elsewhere that we can both *grieve* (Eph. 4:30) and even *quench* (1 Thess. 5:19) the Spirit within us. So this prayer – the Grace – is the perfect communal prayer for Christians to pray for one another as, together and apart we *aim for perfection*:**

***May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.***