

Pentecost 4
20/6/2021

Mark the Evangelist

Ephesians 1:1-14
Psalm 85
Mark 4:35-41

Grace to you, and peace

In a sentence

God offers a more profound peace than we think or dare to ask for

‘Grace to you, and peace, from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ’. This is how the Apostle addresses the people of God. Every New Testament letter under the name of Paul begins with words like these.¹ And so do our worship services each week.

In terms of function, these words look something like a gracious ‘hello’. But Paul’s benediction and that which begins our worship are more than pleasantries. What is a play here is an invocation of the gift of God, and so the naming of our need. We speak the whole of the gospel in these two words, and Paul’s letter to the Ephesians can be read as an extended teasing-out of the meaning of this benediction.

To most people, peace is probably the more familiar of the two concepts. Peace is the motivation of most of what we do; to act is to strive for peace. All our desires are for a peace we don’t yet experience, and are reflected in things like wanting the bombs to stop falling, wanting a place to escape to when it all feels too much, wanting to be warm in this cold weather, or a safe neighbourhood for our children, or a reliable vaccine, or a quiet corner in a café. We act to make such things happen. ‘All we are saying’, we sang 50 years ago, ‘is give peace a chance’.

As *desire*, then, peace is something of a *negative* concept: it begins with a ‘not this’, ‘not here’, ‘not now’, ‘not her’, ‘not them’ – all in relation to the feeling that something is out of place. We are displaced, disappointed, dissatisfied, and peace is being properly placed, appointed and satisfied. Curiously, it is only of the dead that we say that they are ‘at peace’, which must be as about as negative a statement of the possibility of ‘peace in our time’ as we can make.

The ‘not’ hiding in our notions of peace is important because it makes it possible to see that our enemies also desire peace. For that enmity springs from them saying of *us*: not them, not that, not now. Our peace is often the desire that *other people*, in their pursuit of their own desires for peace, go away, for their peace conflicts with ours, their heaven competes with ours.

This is to say that our ‘un-peace’ is not as simple as the presence of a dangerous enemy who brings discord or threatens war. When we say ‘not this’, ‘not now’, ‘not them’, so also do those we distance. And the distancing, the reduction of those others, is the un-peace against which they react. Only the stupid act in such a way as contradict their own desire for peace, and those who oppose us are not usually stupid. But they see *us* as their un-peace, the shape of our peace as cast against the shape of theirs.

¹ See a collection of these greetings in Paul’s letters [here](http://www.thegracestation.com/2012/07/03/grace-and-peace-pauls-introductions-to-his-letters/):
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Seeing the desire for peace in those who oppose us might cause us to grow suspicious of our own visions of peace. What does our peace deny in the desires for peace in others? This is a question at the heart of struggles such as those between colonists and indigenes, oppressors and oppressed, the homed and the homeless, or within tense family relationships. We'll probably see some of it in our efforts to find a new home for the congregation. The peace we long for now becomes much more difficult to define or to visualise, if indeed it is something we are *all* to recognise as peace. It is not merely irony that the church as a whole is most grievously divided at the Eucharist, the sacrament of peace; our visions of peace are the problem.

And so we come to a surprising and troubling possibility: that to link arms and sway back and forth as we sing 'Give peace a chance' might not point to the solution so much as manifest our confusion. More starkly, it might be that war is not so much *overcome* by peace but *caused* by it: the shape of my peace in conflict with the shape of yours.

What then of grace? In a place like this it is strongly emphasised that grace is the nature of something freely given, with particular reference to what God gives. God gives reconciliation with God grace-fully, freely, under no compulsion to do so other than from God's own character.

The thing about a gift – a true, no-strings-attached gift – is that it doesn't spring from need, or at least, it does not spring from the need of the giver – from the giver's vision of unfulfilled peace. A true gift is not about an absence in the giver, a desire for what is not there. Such a gift, then, is unlike desire, in that it carries no potential for competition or conflict. There are no competing desires here, no competing shapes of peace.

This is to say that God has no peace-idea in competition with ours. Competing shapes of peace are dealt with on the cross. To crucify someone is to cast peace in a certain shape – again, negatively: not you, not like that, not now. To crucify someone is to declare, Peace is the absence of you. To *be* crucified, if this is something to which a person freely submits – if, we must say, it is a *gift* – this denies nothing, demands nothing. Jesus on the cross is in conflict with nothing and no one.

And so, when we say that here, on the cross, there is grace, it is not yet the gift of any particular 'thing'. There is no vision of heaven imposed over against our vision, no demand made of us over against our demands on God. The letter to the Ephesians will take us further into the cross, but for today let us note that when Paul greets his churches in this way, 'grace' precedes 'peace': 'Grace to you, and peace, from...' The gift precedes the desire, so that the *gift* and not the *desired* peace determines the shape of what is given. *This* matters because the word of peace from grace is spoken not only to us but also to our enemies. The peace given does not negate our un-peace but exceeds it. True peace is more than we have thought to ask for. True peace springs from grace.

Perhaps we will say more of this in the next couple of months with Ephesians.

But for now we might say that grace – what God gives – is the knowledge that we are seen. Grace is that the Lord lifts up his countenance, and we see ourselves reflected in the eyes of God. The peace which this knowledge will finally realise is that it is the *one* God in whose eyes we all see ourselves reflected. What unites us comes from beyond us and our visions of peace. God's peace exceeds our desire for it.

Heaven is being seen by the God who binds all things together, and the work of peace is calling others to turn towards that gaze.

Grace to you, and peace, from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ, that you might know again your need, and God's gift, and the call to become peace-makers, the very children of God.
