

# Sermon – Christmas 2A

The Text: John 1:11-18

## The Best Gift of All

Were you glad to welcome the New Year? Or are you suffering from some post-Christmas fatigue and weariness? Many people think “If only we could extend the joy of Christmas for a couple more months...!” So what can help? What enables us to tackle the tasks of another year with renewed enthusiasm? The Christmas message, according to St. John, helps us do just that. In today’s Gospel, St John probes deeply into the awesome meaning and significance of what happened at Christmas and in the life of Christ after Christmas, and its never-ending significance for us.

The early Christians treasured immensely the incredible message of verse 14 and saw it as the most important verse in the New Testament: “The Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen His glory, the glory of a Father’s only Son, full of grace and truth.” For the Greek and Roman world of that time, this was an utterly revolutionary and subversive truth. They could never imagine God taking on human flesh and blood, to live a fully human life in our midst. “Flesh” refers to our vulnerable and precarious existence, our mortal life with all its limitations and human needs of food, drink, companionship and sleep.

Into an unwelcoming world, the Creator of all manifests the greatest love in the universe. The infinite God becomes finite in Mary’s child; the eternal Creator takes on a temporal existence with us and for us. This would have to be the most amazing news ever! Jesus defines what God is like for us: “God is Christlike and in God there is nothing un-Christlike.” God is no longer all mystery. Our sins made God into the kind of mystery God was never meant to be. “Your sins have hidden God’s face from you”, it says in Isaiah 59:2.

Jesus’ birth, life and death is God’s decisive unveiling of Himself. Jesus is the brilliant focal point of God’s saving work. He shows us how God would have us live. God no longer speaks to us only as an invisible voice or vision. He now addresses us through the life, words and actions of His Son Jesus Christ. God’s will for us is no longer just on two stone tablets, the Ten Commandments. In Christ, we most clearly see God’s will for us.

We read in Hebrews that ‘In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe (1:1-2). In Christ, we can hear, see and know God like never before.

Jesus was the most approachable Teacher of the first century. He didn't teach in the desert or on a mountain top, but was constantly in the public sphere, surrounded by all kinds of people. Celsus, a major critic of Christianity, complained, "All other great teachers appeal to the wise and noble to come to them; Jesus, however, appealed to the scum of society." The so-called "scum of society" were so grateful that Jesus came to them. The more shameful the people's pasts had been, the more they felt at ease around Jesus. Wherever Jesus went, he was in the centre of everyday life with good news for daily living. There, those with the eyes of faith saw His glory, as did His disciples at the wedding of Cana. "Jesus did this, the first of His signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed His glory, and His disciples believed in Him (John 2:11)."

"We have seen His glory" is the confession of all Christians throughout the ages. Jesus is the glory of God in human form, in a way that's no longer terrifying, but warm and inviting. All who accepted Jesus and welcomed Him into their lives saw inviting glimpses of His glory, from His Baptism to Easter. His glory is cause for endless praise and wonder. His glory shines forth most fully in His actions of love and grace. His glory is greatest in His time of humiliation and all that He sacrificed for our salvation. That's why the New Testament praises our Saviour's humility and obedience more than His miracles.

The greatest aspect of His glory is His gift of grace, costly grace, to us. "From His fullness we have all received grace upon grace (v16)." Because of what Jesus has done for all of us, something wondrously new has happened. God treats us infinitely better than we deserve. Grace is God's unmerited favour and goodwill to us, without any strings attached. The Law points us to Christ and His inexhaustible fount of grace for us. Grace for the writers of the New Testament was such an unexpected act of mercy that they could never take it for granted, and were endlessly grateful for it.

They found it staggering that there should be such an unsurpassed gift as grace at all. It led them to a new style of letter-writing, beginning and ending with the blessing of grace, instead of the words "hail" and "farewell". No wonder those who felt unworthy to receive it treasured it so much. Grace is both the gift of a new life in Christ, and a transforming power, that enables us to live like Jesus, to love like Jesus, and to forgive each other as Jesus has forgiven us. Grace means that my Lord Jesus still wants me despite my lack of patience, my lack of fervency in prayer and other faults and failures. Grace enables us to rejoice over how Jesus treats all the other people in our lives better than they too deserve.

Everywhere we look in the four Gospels, we see how Jesus treated folk like us so much better than they could ever deserve. His parables are illustrations of how grace works in daily life, rather than stories that tell us that we have to be "good". The heroes in His parables are the recipients of grace. We've all received the grace of Christ more, much more, than we realise.

Our life in Christ is based on grace from beginning to end. The gift of life itself is a gift of grace. By grace, we were incorporated into the family of God through Baptism. By grace, many of us were raised in Christian households. By grace, many of us have a Christian spouse, for whom we can never thank God enough. By grace, many of us are blessed with children or grandchildren or other extended family who enrich our lives.

The more we plead for grace and mercy, the more we receive it and see how much more we need it. We are to treat each other with grace as long as we live, as our traditional marriage vows say, "for better, for worse, in sickness and in health..." Grace enables me to see that in a relationship conflict, I can take blame. I can forgive. I can avoid false accusations. What a priceless and indispensable expression of grace forgiveness in the home is!

Grace demolishes our destructive self-righteousness and increases our level of compassion for one another so that love can grow. Grace keeps the lamps lit and the door open for the homecoming of prodigal family members. Grace enables us to love real people just as they are, confident that love will work miracles.

To believe in Jesus is to let ourselves be possessed by Him and changed by his grace, so that He can make it easier for us to love others and others to love us. The better we know Jesus, the more wonderful He becomes and the more we see how much we need Him each and every day. "My grace is sufficient for you", Jesus says. Thank God for that. Amen.