

Christmas Day 2015
(Isaiah 52:7-10 / John 1:1-18)
25.12.2015

In this morning's gospel passage, which reads like a beautifully poetic hymn celebrating the mystery of the incarnation, we heard these words: *We saw His glory, the glory of the only Son of the Father, full of grace and truth ... from His fullness we have, all of us, received – yes, grace in return for grace ... grace and truth have come through Jesus Christ.*

I am struck by the fact that we often hear people speak of *the truth* in very stark ways. This is especially true when it comes to religious people. *The truth* is frequently presented as a somewhat harsh reality, a body of truths to be adhered to, under peril of your life. The gospel's presentation of the truth contrasts with this. In the gospels the truth is not a set of doctrines to be adhered to, but a person with whom we are called to live in a relationship of love.

In the gospel truth appears as the way to life. Jesus' own word is that He is *the way, the truth and the life*. The truth found in His person is a life-giving way to follow.

The Prologue of John's gospel speaks of all of us having *received grace in return for grace, since though the Law was given through Moses, grace and truth have come through Jesus Christ.*

I sometimes wonder if as Christians we do not live with a kind of pre-Christian mentality. We can be more caught up with the Law than with its fulfilment in Jesus and the grace and truth Christ incarnates.

The great Christian truth could be summed up as *all is grace* or again *God's name is mercy*. Again and again the Scriptures affirm that our life and our well-being depend totally upon God's goodness, His steadfast love, His graciousness, His loving kindness, His mercy.

This *Great Year of Mercy* which Pope Francis inaugurated for the whole Church when he pushed opened the Holy Door at St Peter's Basilica on the 8th of December should see all of us open our hearts to welcome the tender mercy of our God which has visited us in Jesus Christ.

What grace flows into our hearts and is, in turn, poured out through us, when we welcome the One who comes to show us God's mercy and make us realise who we truly are: God's children!

As we heard implied in the Prologue of John's: To us who accept Him, He gives power to become children of God. *The word is made flesh and lives among us*. That word takes flesh in our lives, if only we consent to welcome Christ and accept His message of grace and truth and choose to live in His love.

The coming of Christ into our world – and more specifically into our lives – the revelation of God's grace, amounts to nothing less than a *Shaking of the Foundations*, to use the title given to a collection of sermons preached by Paul Tillich. But, if it is *a shaking of the foundations* of our lives, it is, in fact, what gives our lives a truly solid foundation. Jesus continually brings us back to the bedrock on which our lives should be founded: God's steadfast and totally dependable love. If our lives are not built on the solid rock which is Christ, then they are built on sand and they simply will not stand when the storms of life come along.

What is shaken within us when we truly welcome Christ into our lives are all the false foundations upon which we are tempted to build our lives, including, and maybe above all, our false notions of God.

The true foundation of our being is God's love.

It is to God's love that we must be continually coming back. As St Paul teaches, our lives should be *rooted in Christ, planted in love and built upon love*. When this is how we live our lives – *in Christ*

– then nothing can shake us. We can stand steadfast in hope, firm in trust, confident as we place our hope in God's mercy.

God's grace is given to us when we most need it.
It is given to us when the going is especially tough.

Let me quote from one of Paul Tillich's sermons found in that collection of reflections I have spoken of. In the *The Shaking of the Foundations* Tillich says: *Grace strikes us when we are in great pain and restlessness. It strikes us when we walk through the dark valley of a meaningless and empty life... Grace strikes us when our disgust for our own being, our indifference, our weakness, our hostility, and our lack of direction and composure have become intolerable to us.*

The Prologue of John's gospel speaks of all who accepted/all who accept the One God sent, the One who is grace and truth.

There is an invitation there for us to accept Jesus into our hearts.

Perhaps what we need to hear alongside that call to accept Christ into our lives is, above all else, the assurance of His acceptance of us.

Let me return to the insights of Paul Tillich in that same collection of sermons and share with you the follow-on to the quotation given above.

This is what Tillich goes on to say: *Sometimes at that moment a wave of light breaks into our darkness and it is as though a voice were saying: 'You are accepted. You are accepted by that which is greater than you' ... 'Simply accept that you are accepted'.*

You are accepted! We are accepted!

If only we all realised the truth of that reassuring word spoken to us by God!

When we dare to believe this word and hear it spoken to us, what we are led to experience is a profound healing in the very depth of our being!

So many of our ills stem from our difficulty to accept ourselves!

So much of the deep malaise we feel inside ourselves stems from our struggle to believe that God well and truly love us and that the first evidence we have of this is His acceptance of us as we are – not as we dream we should be already.

If the poet Sansom assures us that Christ sees us not only as we are now, but as we might become, this does not mean that the Lord will only accept us further down the road, when we match up to what we are called to be.

Our loving God accepts us here and now in and with the pain and misery that is ours.

He has espoused our misery by coming into this world to show us mercy.

Our misery does not frighten Him; it calls forth His mercy. The more miserable we are, the more He wants to show us mercy.

The Prologue of John's gospel speaks of our contemplating God's glory.

The American spiritual writer, Brennan Manning has a beautiful few lines about what contemplating Christ's love at Christmas does for us.

I leave the penultimate word to him.

He writes: *The contemplative at Christmas grows quiet before' the light (that) shines in the darkness' (John 1:5). He stills his soul and becomes tranquil like a child in its mother's arms. He interiorises and appropriates to himself the mercy, the forgiveness, reconciliation and love that are embodied in the child of Bethlehem. He surrenders to the grace of the Word made flesh. He accepts acceptance.*

Pope Francis calls upon us all throughout this *Year of Mercy* to contemplate day after day the *misericordiae vultus, the face of mercy*. He calls us to go further still and to reflect the loving visage of God in our turn: to be the *visage of mercy* for all those we encounter.

What we are given to see when we look at Christ is the reflection of God's love. Jesus' face speaks to us of the Father's gentle compassion, His tender, loving care for each human being. Let us take time to gaze upon Christ's face in a quiet moment during the course of this Christmas day and during the days ahead. The days of the Christmas season which lie ahead are given to us as a period in which we can take the time we need unpack and savour with deep gratitude and heartfelt appreciation the great Christmas gift which is God having sent His Son into the world to reveal His love for us.