

2nd Sunday after Christmas
(Ecclesiasticus 24:1-2. 8-12 / John 1:1-18)
05.01.2025
Amazing Grace

The prologue of St John's Gospel we just heard has already been proclaimed on Christmas day and again last Tuesday. The whole Christmas event is thus summed up in these eighteen verses wherein we are told that "the Word was made flesh" in the Son of the Father, Jesus Christ, who is "full of grace."

The word *grace* occurs 4 times in the last verses of the Prologue and we can conclude that Jesus is not only "full of grace" but that he is, in himself, grace incarnate and so, with St Paul, in the mystery of his Incarnation, we believe that "the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all" (Titus 2:11).

The word *grace* is difficult to define in a short sentence. It speaks of the gift and the way the gift is given: Jesus Christ is given to us totally and generously, without any initiative being taken on our behalf. It is clear that we cannot manufacture grace, much less earn or buy it. Grace comes with Christ so that, as St Paul suggests, we may come "to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ" (Eph 4:13). Unfortunately we all have grace-resistant hearts and we often rather prefer to survive than to live fully; sometimes we are inclined to cling to our small and narrow knowledge and security rather than follow the Lord wherever he goes and, with him, take the risk to "put out into the deep water" (Lk 5:4). Yet God never gives up on us. He comes to us over and over again to call us to life in the world which he loves so much (cf. Jn 3:16).

We have nothing to fear because we know that the words of Zechariah, St John the Baptist's father, are now fully accomplished: "The tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us" (Lk 1:78). At Christmas, grace is God's loving kindness, his gracious mercy made visible in our flesh.

The good news is that we are made recipients of this grace out of God's boundless generosity. Eugene Peterson translates v. 16 of the Prologue of John's Gospel: "We all live off his generous abundance, gift after gift after gift."

If, in the prologue to his Gospel, St John links *grace* and *truth* twice, this is because in the gracious revelation of his love for us, the Father does not reveal just one aspect of his identity but the truth of who he is.

He also reveals something about who we have become through our baptism. Like St Paul each one of us can say: "By the grace of God I am what I am." (1 Co 15:10) We are not the result of an accident, we are not thrown into the world by pure chance or fate but we are who we are by God's grace, which gives purpose and meaning to our lives.

At the beginning of 2025, which is a jubilee year in the Catholic Church, it may be important for us to reflect on who we are as persons and as communities. Is our identity the result of God's grace through Jesus Christ or is it informed only by our fears, wounds, ideologies and sins?

Are we well and truly a graceful people, a people animated by generous love?

St Paul reminds us that "we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us" (Rm 12:6). This means that we are not all supposed to do the same thing in the same way. There is – and there must be – diversity in the way we bear witness to God's grace at work in us. Yet, as St Peter writes, all of us are called to be "good stewards of the manifold grace of God" (1 P 4:10). True grace cannot remain sterile, it must bear fruit in our hearts and in the world. When Barnabas arrived in Antioch, we are told that "he saw the grace of God, he

rejoiced, and he exhorted all the believers to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast devotion” (Acts 11:23). Barnabas saw the fruits of grace and he rejoiced. Let us ask ourselves: do we rejoice in the work of grace in one another and when others look at us, who are Christians, do they rejoice?

It is striking to note that St Paul begins all his letters with the words “Grace and Peace to you”. Since there are many children, women and men who suffer war and violence in the world, and given that there are many Christians, and many men and women of good will, who endure persecution, we must imitate St Paul and pray that grace and peace be given to all.

We have to begin here where we are, in Northern Ireland, in our families and communities. First, we must be honest and recognise that, in our society, there are many areas marked by bigotry and racism, and in our Churches, there are still many insidious forms of clericalism and self-reliance. Our society and our Churches need to be cleansed and renewed by grace, by the work of the Spirit of truth. This will happen only if each one of us becomes a minister of the grace he or she has received from God.

St Paul’s exhortation to the disciples in Ephesus is addressed to us today: “Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear.” (4:29)

May our words and deeds, our decisions and all our attitudes be gracious and rooted and grounded in love (cf. Eph 3:17), so that they may contribute to the building up of a world wherein hope flourishes.