

John 1:10-18 “¹⁰ He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognise him. ¹¹ He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. ¹² Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God— ¹³ children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband’s will, but born of God. ¹⁴ The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. ¹⁵ ¶ John testifies concerning him. He cries out, saying, “This was he of whom I said, ‘He who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.’” ¹⁶ From the fulness of his grace we have all received one blessing after another. ¹⁷ For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. ¹⁸ No-one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father’s side, has made him known.”

Eph 1:3-14 “³ ¶ Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. ⁴ For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love ⁵ he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will— ⁶ to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves. ⁷ In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God’s grace ⁸ that he lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding. ⁹ And he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, ¹⁰ to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfilment—to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ. ¹¹ In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will, ¹² in order that we, who were the first to hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory. ¹³ And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, ¹⁴ who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God’s possession—to the praise of his glory.”

1Jo 3:1 “How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him.”

Through this Christmas season we have journeyed through the early chapters of the Gospels from the prophetic expectations of Zacharias and Mary and Simeon through to the birth of the long-awaited King who would usher in the new Kingdom of God. Last week we read of the wise men from the east who came to worship Jesus whilst the Jewish king Herod tried to kill Him. This was itself a prophetic enactment of the sad reality that John proclaims at the start of our Gospel reading:

“He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him.”

Herod had been trying to present himself as the King and Saviour of Israel and killed anyone who presented the slightest challenge. Those who eventually called for Jesus' death felt threatened by this miracle worker from Galilee. But many sincere and serious-minded people both then and since have rejected Jesus because He did not meet their expectations of a Messiah.

The prophets spoke of a restored nation of Israel having thrown off the shackles of servitude to occupying forces and being justly ruled by God through the messiah-king in the line of David. The Jews of Jesus' day were expecting national deliverance leading to freedom from the oppression of unjust rulers. They expected national prosperity and greatness.

Although Jesus claimed to be God's anointed ruler in His new kingdom He was a puzzle. He both spoke and acted with unprecedented authority, especially through the healings,

but He made no headway towards transforming Israel into a great nation or bringing world peace and justice.

Because the kingdom that Jesus brought was quite different from their expectations most of the religious leaders rejected Jesus as a fake. This has been a stumbling block for the majority of God-fearing Jews down through the centuries.

However, having spent three years living with Jesus, His disciples were in no doubt of His being sent by God with His authority. In time they came to realise that the whole nation of Israel and its long and colourful history was not leading to a socio-political climax, but rather that the whole was symbolic of a larger reality. God's project was not Israel, but all the peoples of the world. The Kingdom was not merely about the pecking-order of one nation amongst many, but about victory over the devil and deliverance from his power for every individual who becomes a child of God.

And so John tells us that being a member of God's family was no longer to be a national thing but rather an individual thing available to all the peoples of the nations:

“to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God”

Again and again Jesus made outlandish statements and claims redefining what the Kingdom is, what the Law was, who the people of God are, who would inherit the kingdom and so on.

One of the things that caused most upset amongst the Jews was Jesus' redefinition of membership of God's chosen people, His family:

“born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.”

Each person needs to be “born of God”. Being a child of God, one of the chosen people, was no longer a national privilege belonging to Israel alone, but was on the basis of belief in Jesus as the King of God's promised Kingdom on earth. Descent from Abraham counted for nothing.

Anyone who accepted Jesus' claim to kingship could become a child of God. But even then it required God's sovereign action; to give us new-birth through the work of the Holy Spirit.

The fact that Jesus describes this as being *born* indicates that it is a transformative experience; dying to our old nature and being born-again with a new one. Something of great significance changes in us when we become a child of God. The prophets described it variously as

- being given a heart of flesh in place of our hearts of stone;
- having God's law written on our hearts;
- knowing God for ourselves
- valuing fellowship with God above all else

Not only are we changed through being born-again, but Jesus has transformed the very nature of our knowledge of God. Under the Old Covenant the best that most people could hope for was to know *about* God, to know what the

Law said and to try and keep it. But through Jesus and His gift of the Holy Spirit our relationship with God has been transformed. We can know him personally in a child/father relationship with Jesus as our Brother.

“The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.”

John wrote these words in the literal sense; he saw the glory of Jesus with his eyes as Jesus dwelt in the flesh with him. But Jesus rose from the dead and is alive and continues to dwell with us full of grace and truth. We cannot see Him with our eyes, but the Holy Spirit has been given to us so that we can see Jesus. We see Him in one another, in the reading of God’s word and in numerous other ways. And He speaks to us in myriad ways.

What a contrast this is with the Old Covenant! No longer is communion with God a special privilege of the priesthood or the especially devout. The Old Covenant religion celebrated the Law of Moses, but the New Covenant celebrates grace:

“From the fullness of his grace we have all received one blessing after another. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.”

Our epistle reading explores the consequences of that grace, making it clear that God loves us because of His love and not because of our performance. This new foundation of grace allows believers to be totally secure in his love. We have received from Him grace upon grace.

But it is not just grace that Jesus brings us; He also brings truth. Grace is relatively easy to receive but truth is often difficult. Here are some “grace” scriptures:

“God demonstrates his love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God’s wrath through him!” (Rom 5:8-9)

From our reading in Ephesians:

“In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God’s grace.” (Eph 1:7)

The truth Jesus brings is not so easy to receive. Consider for instance this truth from John 3:18

“Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son.”

“Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and there are many who enter through it. But the gate is small and the way is narrow that leads to life, and there are few who find it.” (Matt 7:13-14)

Grace upon grace does not come to everyone, but only to the children of God; those who believe and receive Jesus. If we want to receive grace, we must believe His truth. We cannot receive “Jesus” but reject the truth He taught. Grace and truth come together as a package. We must accept Jesus as He is without requiring Him to fit in with our ideas.

Jesus never shrunk back from proclaiming the truth. Many times we read of people who were attracted to Him because of His grace, but then went away because the truth was too challenging for them.

We do no-one any favours by presenting gospel grace without gospel truth. It only leads to confusion and disappointment. Telling someone that God loves them no matter what they do and that Jesus died to save them is the grace-part of the Gospel. It needs to be accompanied with the truth – that repentance, being born-again and obedience to Jesus is how we receive that grace – without which we are condemned to God’s endless wrath.

Let us pray as we enter this new year, that we might live as authentic children of God, secure in His grace, believing His truth and obedient to the Holy Spirit. But let us pray also that we might have the courage to share the authentic Gospel – Jesus the King, who brings to us both grace and truth.