Grace, glory, presence and beginnings

The sermon preached by Rev'd Keith Pearce at Rosyth Methodist Church at Morning Worship on 4 January 2026, the Second Sunday of Christmas
The readings were: Ephesians 1:3–14 and John 1:10–18

I've called today's sermon, "Grace, glory, presence and beginnings" because that's what it's about! – Well, that's what I think it's about, based on themes that stood out for me in the readings. – Of course, what you hear may be something quite different, especially if the Spirit causes you to drift off into your own thoughts – but that's ok, because that will be between you and God.

The readings we heard just now – from the beginning of Paul's letter to the Ephesians and also from what's called the 'prologue' to John's Gospel – are, I find, quite inspired and inspiring. Neither of them tell the story of Jesus' birth in Bethlehem, nor do they include stories about angels, shepherds or wise men from the east. But both of them take a step back, as it were, to look at the big picture, to try to sum up what was going on. That's partly, perhaps, because John is writing his gospel much later than the other gospels, but not Paul – he was writing even before the first Gospel (the gospel of Mark) was written. He just chooses to look at the big picture – God's overarching plan.

"In the beginning was the Word", says John, clearly referring us back to the first words of Genesis and to the dawn of creation itself, when God spoke and things happened – "Let there be light" – and there was light!

St Paul similarly writes about God's cosmic plan, "Even before the world was made", he says, "God had **already** chosen us to be his through our union with Christ Jesus, so that we would be holy and without fault before him." – That's not just some niggling bit of theology – the idea of predestination – the idea that some are chosen while others aren't! Far from it! Paul is saying that that was God's intention right from the start – that we (we humans – all of **us**) would be holy and without fault before him. He goes on to say later that "this plan, which God will complete when the time is right, is to bring all creation together, **everything** in heaven and on earth, with Christ as head." That's what God has predestined, not merely personal salvation for a chosen few! And that point about 'all creation' should make us stop and think too, because, as St

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Paul has clearly realised, God's intention is to bring everything into harmony with God's self; so climate change and the loss of so many species of plant and animal, should very much concern us too, if we are in harmony with God. But what an amazing vision Paul has, when he sees the big picture, the overarching plan of God – which is why he bursts out saying, "Let us then, who were the first to hope in Christ, praise God's glory!"

And that's echoed in John's gospel when he explains the big picture, "The Word became a human being and, full of grace and truth, lived among us. We saw his glory, the glory which he received as the Father's only Son." – He's talking about Jesus, not simply the child in the stable in Bethlehem, but his whole life and love and teaching and sacrificial death and resurrection. "We saw his **glory**." The other gospel writers refer to Jesus 'glory' in the story of Transfiguration on the mountain and so does St Peter in his second letter, reminding his readers that he was there when he and James and John not only saw the glory of Jesus but heard the voice of God saying, "This is my own dear Son. Listen to him!"

But I think I'm getting ahead of myself, talking about 'Glory'. I guess it's because I sometimes feel that we get so bound up with our own struggles, concerns and troubles, bowed down by a constant stream of bad news about selfishness, greed, hatred and suffering, that we can't even manage to take a step back and see the big picture or glimpse a vision of God's glory revealed in Jesus. – But I think we should!

Anyway, I am getting ahead of myself, because I really want to draw attention to the other great theme we see in today's two readings, which is **Grace**. In John 1:16 we read "Out of the fullness of his grace he has blessed us all, giving us one blessing after another. God gave the Law through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ." And in Ephesians we read, "Because of his love, God had already decided that through Jesus Christ he would make us his offspring – this was his pleasure and purpose. Let us praise God for his glorious grace, for the free gift he gave us in his dear Son!"

There are two things there that explain what grace is. One is 'the free gift' and the other is that word we looked at earlier, 'Already'.

Obedience to the Law of Moses was at the heart of Judaism in the Old Testament. I have to say as well that the concept of obedience is also key to Muslim faith. In itself that's not a bad thing but it means that, especially as more and more detailed laws are added to the Ten Commandments, holiness becomes something that very few can achieve. And indeed, achieving, trying to earn God's favour, seems to be the aim. And inevitably failure is the result. Well I suppose the other thing is that we take a comparative view, so "compared with the others, I'm a really good person!" – which is not about being at one with God at all!

Jesus' teaching is quite different. He offers to us all a relationship with God whom he urges us to think of as a Loving Father. We pray, "Our Father in heaven". It's not a presumptuous, pally relationship – we say "Hallowed be your name" – but it's a relationship based on unconditional love.

The story of the prodigal son illustrates this. Like a most loving and forgiving parent, the father welcomes back the worst of sinners. No conditions, but instead, a celebration. The sad bit of the story is that that was *always* the case. The father had always loved his sons, from the moment they were born. God's love for all his children is a given, but many people don't realise it. You are *already* loved. You are *already* forgiven.

Grace is a free gift – you can't earn it, but you do have to receive it.

Well, of course, we know all this, so I don't need to say it, – or do I?

You see, I'm conscious from my own experience, that I and perhaps many of us, can't quite let go of some of our past mistakes, can't quite believe that God could love such a flawed character as me, and couldn't possibly forgive us for going on repeating mistakes and failures, for shouting and blaming and not trusting people, and all the other stuff in our lives that make us not the person we want to be. We so easily fall into being like the prodigal son on his way home, but, seeing the Father running towards us, arms open wide, we shout "Stop! I don't deserve this! Can't you see, I'm still a mess!" And, as the Father comes to embrace us, we hold him at arms length!

I just want to say, if that's you (or me) today, at the beginning of 2026, let's just stop, and have a cry, and let God the Father hold us again.

Philip Yancey once wrote in his book *What's so amazing about grace?*, "There's nothing you can do to make God love you more; and there's nothing you can do that would make God love you less!"

That's grace. "The Word became a human being and, full of grace and truth, lived among us."

And that's another great theme of these readings – **Presence**. The incarnate God, the Word become a human being, is present with us as we journey through the year, "Out of the fullness of his grace he has blessed us all, giving us one blessing after another." May we rejoice in his grace and know God's presence always.

I'd like to share a final thought before we finish with the Christmas themes altogether. We'd been watching *Call the Midwife, Christmas Special* (as you do) – probably one of the most sentimental programmes on television, yet at the same time one that tackles some of the most gritty social issues we've known in our lifetimes. So right at the end sister Monica Joan commented about Christmas coming at the end of the year but that the birth of a child is always a precious gift, a beginning, the start of an unknown journey through life. And that started me thinking. Our Christmas seems to be over as soon as it arrives; carols which have gone on for weeks, suddenly stop once Christmas Day is done, and we wait a few days to draw a line under the old year. It struck me that by Christmas Day we've already passed the winter solstice, the days are already getting longer, the Light has come, a new year has dawned. I thought, "Are we looking at things the wrong way, focusing on the ending, rather than the beginning?"

Several of us here are nearer the ending of our lives than the beginning. But I think that question has relevance for us all. Frustrated as we might be by the things we once did but can do no longer(!), and anxious as we might be by the news and the way international relations are going, and sad as we might be about the closure of churches we've known and loved, might it be that by focussing on endings, we miss the beginnings?

Our grandchildren, I believe, are much better equipped to face the challenges of the coming years than we are. And recent statistics have shown renewed interest in Christian faith and the Bible, especially among Generation Z. Might we be seeing the beginning of a new response to God's amazing grace?

So I pray that God in his providence and grace may help us all, as we get older still through the course of this year, to be aware of his presence, to glimpse his glory, to receive his amazing grace, and to focus on the new beginnings happening all around us. Amen.

Our picture of adult hands helping a baby to walk was taken by Jessie Maxwell and made available on Unsplash.