

GRACE CHANGES EVERYTHING

(Genesis 37.17b-28, 50.15-21 and Mark 11.22-26)

We are starting an eight-week sermon series today on God's amazing grace.

Grace is the overarching, grand narrative of the Bible. Grace is amazing.

There's a Christian drug rehabilitation mission near Madrid called Betel. It has given birth to a church of several hundred young men and their families and friends. It's a church full of former drug addicts, dealers, prostitutes, alcoholics, thugs and even murderers. But through Betel, they met Jesus Christ, found forgiveness of sin, freedom from addiction, a family to belong to, and a future to live for.

When they worship, they shout loudly and dance enthusiastically. A man called Raul was one of the first to be delivered from heroin addiction. He became a pastor. Someone asked him once why they worship so noisily and energetically. He just said "We dance because we cannot fly."

Grace is the full gospel; it's both sides of the coin. If I gave you a £1 coin and on one side it had the Queen's head but on the other side was blank it would not be legal tender. The coin needs to be minted on both sides to have value.

It's the same with grace – if we just say "Christ died for us" we only preach half the gospel. The full gospel of grace is this: "*While we were still sinners* Christ died for us."

It's precisely when we were alienated from God, spiritually empty, disinterested and apathetic about anything to do with God, eternally lost, up the creek without a paddle that Jesus loved us and died in our place.

Diamonds sparkle finest when they're set against a black, velvet background. The sheer exquisiteness of grace is only really fully visible when we see how spiritually bankrupt, how deeply lost, we are in sin.

The Bible is full of stories of grace. One of them is the story of Joseph; it's hard to think of anyone (apart from Jesus) who was so good, so upright, so virtuous, so talented – and yet so mistreated.

Let me try and condense 14 chapters of scripture into about 4 minutes.

Joseph is the precocious 11th of 12 brothers. He has a remarkable gift for interpreting dreams. As a result of being his dad's favourite, he attracts the jealousy of his siblings, who decide one day to sell him as a slave to passing travellers. They fake his death and tell his father he was killed by wild beasts.

Joseph is taken down to Egypt and sold in the slave market to an important official called Potiphar who soon sees how gifted and reliable he is and puts him in charge of his entire estate. One day, Potiphar's wife tries to seduce him but Joseph refuses her advances and, humiliated by this rejection, she frames him for attempted rape.

So Joseph gets locked up for something he didn't do. But such is God's favour on his life that the Prison Governor trusts Joseph with running the entire prison.

While Joseph is doing time, Pharaoh's cupbearer and baker, both inside for some misdemeanour, each have a dream. Joseph interprets them both and says to the cupbearer tomorrow you will be pardoned.

"I've done nothing wrong to be in here, please help me when you get out" - but the cupbearer forgets about him as soon as he's free.

Years go by. Then one day, Pharaoh has a puzzling dream. No one knows what it means but the cupbearer says "I know a Hebrew prisoner who is good at this kind of thing." They send for Joseph, clean him up and present him to Pharaoh.

Joseph tells Pharaoh that the dream means there will be seven years of bumper harvests followed by seven years of drought.

He advises Pharaoh to store grain ahead of the famine. Pharaoh is so impressed that he promotes Joseph, on the spot, to basically run the country. So Joseph oversees the construction of vast grain stores and arranges for the harvests to be stockpiled before the famine comes.

When it does come, all the neighbouring countries, including Israel, come to Egypt to buy grain and avoid starvation. One day, Joseph sees his brothers queuing to get supplies for their families. Joseph is dressed as a high official and speaks Egyptian so they don't recognise him. Finally, after much intrigue, he cannot hold it in any longer and takes them into a side room and says to them in Hebrew, "I am Joseph!"

They are terrified; the brother they beat up and made a slave is now the second-most powerful man in the world. But Joseph embraces them. So their families come down to Egypt to live like royalty and the story ends in chapter 50 with Joseph saying "Don't be afraid. You intended to harm me..., but God intended it for good."

Grace changes everything.

It changes everything for people who are badly treated. Joseph was:

- hated by his brothers
- rejected by his captors
- falsely accused by Potiphar's wife
- wrongly imprisoned by his master
- and he was left to rot by the cupbearer

That's a pretty bad run isn't it? Thirteen years elapsed between his brothers selling him into slavery and his elevation by Pharaoh. Thirteen solid years of mistreatment, rough justice and exploitation! And he did nothing to deserve any of it. How would you feel? I know how I'd feel.

But grace changes everything.

Think about this for a minute. The Prison Governor gets fired if a prisoner escapes on his watch. And yet he hands over the running of the entire jail to this nobody, this Hebrew slave. He gives Joseph the keys. He doesn't feel he needs to check what Joseph is doing.

Either he is a lunatic or he has seen that Joseph has outstanding character and ability – and it's the latter. He sees an innocent man who says, "Even in this prison, I'm going to give my absolute best and not become embittered." What he sees in Joseph is the anointing and presence of God that is on those who have learned to forgive from the heart.

How can I get to that place of being able to let it go? There is a grace to forgive. The Lord has imparted the power to heal and the grace to forgive to anyone who asks and opens their hands to receive.

Grace changes everything. It enables us to see that even in times of hardship and mistreatment, when evil seems to be on top, God's purposes are higher still.

God, takes the flats and minors and off notes of our lives and blends them with other notes into the magnificent song of his majesty. That's grace.

I cannot but agree with the first century Jewish sage Rabbi Aaron who said "I wish I could love the greatest saint like the Lord loves the greatest sinner."

This is not just a great story. It is vitally important because grace is the church's basic message to the world. This is essentially what Saint Mary's has to offer Long Newton. If we take grace out of it, we're left with a grade 2 listed museum, a community get-together, gardening and social work.

That's all very nice, but it can't change the world and it won't touch hearts with the power of the Holy Spirit. I didn't go into ordained ministry to give people a little bit more religion. I gave up a good career in retail management because I believe the grace of God can renew the church, transform society and change everything.

Everything we do and say is measured by the degree to which it displays or masks the message of grace. This is the one and only thing that makes Saint Mary's truly amazing. Amazing grace.