

FULL OF GRACE AND TRUTH

(Exodus 19.16-22 and John 1.14-18)

Black and white: hot and cold: chalk and cheese: wet and dry

What am I talking about? Opposites; contrasts. Could we have any greater contrasts than our two readings today?

From Exodus we have the Israelites on their 40 year trek after escaping from slavery in Egypt. They reach Mount Sinai and camp at the bottom. Moses, on instructions from God, tells the people that they have three days to get ready for God to speak from a cloud on the top of the mountain – specifically, they are told to wash their clothes and to consecrate themselves and stay right at the very base of the mountain. That's a summary of chapter 19 up to the point where our reading began.

Comes the third day. There is thunder and lightning and a thick cloud and a loud trumpet blast. It's followed by a fire and thick smoke. Then the whole mountain shakes. The trumpet gets even louder. Moses is summoned by God to the top of the mountain and the ordinary people are warned on pain of death not to approach. Can you picture it? Loud thunder, crackling lightning, fire, dense smoke, ear-splitting trumpet blasts. Unseen within all this is God - an awesome and terrible God who is utterly frightening and completely and utterly unapproachable.

A dire threat – *on pain of death* – a bit like the man whose evidence in court was utterly hopeless and clearly unreliable and unbelievable. So much so that the judge warned him that he was in danger of perjuring himself.

Are you aware, said the judge, of what will happen to you if you are caught lying under oath?

Yes, your honour, the witness replied, When I die, I'll go to hell.

But what else? said the judge.

The man was puzzled and thought for a moment: *You mean there's something worse?*

So, leaving aside the jokes, what is all this thunder and lightning and fire and smoke all about? Well it's the prelude to the giving of the Ten Commandments – set out in the next chapter of Exodus. After the tenth commandment, Moses gives the people this explanation and reason:
Do not be afraid. God has come to test you, so that the fear of God will be with you to keep you from sinning.

And the Old Testament is full of that sort of idea – threats about the results of wrongdoing – read almost any of the prophets. But those prophets also look to something and **someone** different. Listen to Isaiah in Chapter 42:
Here is my servant whom I will uphold. My chosen one in whom I delight. I will put my Spirit upon him and he will bring justice to the nations. He will not shout or cry out, or raise his voice in the streets. A bruised reed he will not break and a smouldering wick he will not snuff out. Matthew in chapter 12 of his gospel tells us that he is talking about Jesus.

In the first chapter of his gospel, John tells us all about Jesus so that as we can better understand what he goes on to say about Jesus' life and death and resurrection. Jesus, who John calls The Word, was there at the very start of things; his life gives light for the world; he enables us to be part of God's family. Then those words which we heard read today – *The Word became flesh and dwelt among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.*

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Full of grace: well we know what grace is, don't we?

A woman invited some people to dinner. At the table she turned to her 6 year old daughter and said: *Would you like to say grace dear?*

But I don't know what to say, the little girl replied.

Just say what you hear mummy say.

The little girl bowed her head and said: *Dear Lord, why on earth did I invite all these stupid people to dinner?*

No, not that sort of grace – of course not!

The vicar's small son had to apologise for forgetting his aunt's birthday. He wrote:

I'm sorry I forgot your birthday. I have no excuse, and it would serve me right if you forgot mine – which is next Friday.

That was neither graceful nor gracious!

Full of truth: well we know what truth is, don't we?

The vicar told his congregation: *Next week I plan to preach about the sin of lying. To help you understand my sermon, I want you all to read Mark, chapter 17.*

The following Sunday, as he prepared to give his sermon, the vicar asked for a show of hands. He wanted to know how many had read Mark, chapter 17. Every hand went up. The vicar smiled and said, *Mark has only 16 chapters. I rest my case!*

Well, we've had a bit of a giggle about grace and truth. Let's look now at those words as demonstrated by Jesus.

Do you remember how he rescued a wedding from disaster at Cana?

Do you remember how he dealt with that woman dragged in front of him after being found in the act of adultery?

Do you remember how he was happy to have dinner with all sorts of people looked down upon by the leaders of society?

Do you remember when he told his disciples about forgiveness – not just seven times but seventy times that number?

Do you remember how he was on his way to heal the daughter of the chief man in the synagogue when he was told to turn back because she had died and still went to his house with the words *She is not dead, she's just asleep?*

Do you remember him making sure that thousands of folk who had come to hear what he had to say did not go away hungry using just a small boy's bread and fish picnic?

You will be able to think of many more examples of the grace of God shown in action by Jesus – full of grace and truth.

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Those contrasts again. Here's another one – Jesus turned those 10 negative THOU SHALT NOT commandments in Exodus into just two positive ones – all about love. You are to love God with all your being and to love your neighbour as much as you love yourself. There's grace for you!

Full of grace and truth.

We've had a smile about truth and that non-existent chapter of Mark's gospel. Jesus came to demonstrate the truth about his Father God:

A God who answers prayer.

A God who can be trusted even when things are really grim.

A God who invites everyone to be part of his family

A God whose Holy Spirit is there to guide and inspire us

A God who allowed his own son to suffer and to die a horrible death to make us right with him.

A God who, above all, brought that son back to life so that we could have a wonderful life beyond the grave.

It's Christmas time when we give presents to those we love.

It's Christmas time - when the best present of all became flesh and made his dwelling among us – full of grace and truth.

St. Paul ended his second letter to the Christians in Corinth with the words we know simply as 'The Grace'. It seems a good way to end a sermon on grace and truth. Let's stand and pray it for and to one another:

May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all evermore. Amen

