

## **House of Grace**

At our world mission meeting at the Presbytery Office this week, as convenor of world mission, I introduced our missionary partner to our committee by zoom. Our missionary partner is Rev Muriel Pearson who is associate minister for the Church of Scotland in Tabetha in Israel.

She spoke of the desperate times that innocent people of Israel and Gaza have endured amidst the ravages of war, destruction, and deep suffering.

Despite the ceasefire, which is at best uncertain and precarious; she spoke of the suffering of people in the West Bank; hundreds killed, and the effects that this war has had on the economy of these nations.

But she spoke of the indomitable spirit of the ordinary people, amongst those who are suffering. She spoke of moments of grace, where Arab and Jew are working hand in hand.; moments of grace where differences are laid aside, and people work for the common good.

She spoke of Sindyanna of Galilee, which is a project that in cooperation with other local organisations, reclaimed derelict lands and transformed them into Israel's first flourishing Jewish-Arab organic and regular olive groves.

The results are as magical as the landscape. By combining sustainable cultivation with modern techniques, they produce award-winning, best tasting olive oils, and Muriel said last year's has been the best yet! The fruits of the groves are much more than great olive oil; rather, they are a passion for the environment, and invaluable, trust-building cooperation between local Arabs and Jews.

Moment of grace in a war-torn land, a land scarred by conflict and yet there are seeds of hope and these seeds come in the form of ordinary people, willing to risk all for the sake of friendship and a future together.

If you asked me for one word to sum up the Christian faith, it would be the word, Grace.

At the heart of the message of Jesus was grace.

What kind of grace we might well ask?

Willie Barclay in his commentary to the Galatians, describes grace in two ways; Firstly, it is something of sheer beauty. The Greek word *charis* means grace in the theological sense but he writes the idea of charm is never far from it.

“If the Christian life has grace, it must be a lovely thing”, he writes.

The second description of grace, is that grace is that of an undeserved generosity, a gift, which is never deserved, and could never be earned, given in the generous love of God.

For a short time in my youth, I attempted to learn the bagpipes, a glorious failure, you might be delighted that I never pursued it; I never got much further than the scale, but I did learn part of the hymn tune *Amazing Grace* and I also loved the wee note that is played to enhance the tune, that wee note is called a grace note, just with a wee touch with the pinkie on the top note; a wee something extra, something added to the tune; something added to the give tune a charm.

We say grace when we have our meals, a sign of thanking God for his generosity to us.

Galatians is a small book of 6 chapters in the New Testament. It was originally a letter written by St Paul, to a Church that had forgotten the importance of God's grace.

They had become trapped in the law. They were Christians who had come to faith and came to know and experience God's grace through Jesus, but they turned from that grace and were becoming entrapped in the law again.

They thought that by their good deeds, and strict obedience to the law and external symbols, God would be pleased. The law became their master, and they strove to obey the law to its letter; they thought that by obeying the law this satisfied God; but Paul reminds them throughout the letter, of the power of God's grace, and the importance of God's grace and that without receiving God's grace, first and foremost, they would never please God.

You see, Paul points out to the Galatians, that the love of Christ was a love which gave and suffered. The love of Christ is a love that conquered and achieved, and this is ultimately God's grace; God's gift given to us freely and extravagantly.

Today in our gospel reading, Jesus is calling people to receive the living water of his grace, "If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink, whoever believes in me, as the Scripture says, streams of living water will flow within him."

This beautiful metaphor is of Jesus giving himself to us. This is grace; it's a gift that we receive.

It is an image of water and water is a symbol of cleansing – the first thing that God's grace does for us, is that it cleanses us. His grace is seen in his forgiveness. I love the old hymn, and we'll sing it after the sermon, *Rock of Ages* and particularly the verse which I now use in my prayers...

*"Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to the cross I cling,*

*naked come to thee for dress, helpless look to thee for grace;*

*Foul, I to the fountain fly, wash me saviour or I die."*

Toplady was the author of this hymn and he certainly understood the nature of God's grace.

Grace cleanses us from sin and makes us right with God and we all need this cleansing, for we are all entangled with the sin of this world.

Water refreshes us, just as grace comes to lift us up when we are down. It comes and whispers into our ear, God loves you and is with you.

Water sustains us, can you imagine a world without water?...Grace fills us with hope and gives us the strength to keep on going.

You see, Jesus just didn't speak about grace, he walked in grace, lived by grace.

One very hot day, at a lonely well in Samaria, a woman approached Jesus, Jesus was at the well and he had nothing to reach down and draw the water, and the woman came close to him, something that a Jew and Samaritan would never do, something that a Jewish man would not entertain with a woman, and Jesus engages in conversation with the woman. He speaks gently into her heart; he saw that she was thirsty, her spirit was dry, her eyes were probably listless; he saw that she carried pain and was burdened,

and Jesus was able to tell her that she had had five husbands and the man that she was now with, was not her husband; this woman's life was exposed; he saw her desperate need and Jesus that day filled her life with living water; his spirit nurtured her soul, and he filled her with life giving water, she went back to her town, and told the people there come and see a man, who told me everything, could this be the Messiah?

It is one of the most beautiful stories in the Gospel because it shows why Jesus came into this world, to give people a second chance, to give people who were worn out with life another opportunity to receive new life; like Nicodemus, that old Jewish lawyer who came to Jesus at night searching for the meaning of life, and Jesus tells him that he needed to be born again, a new start, a new beginning. He needed to receive God's grace.

I could go through story after story in the Gospel of Jesus' - encounters with individuals, and we only have a sample recorded, but after the resurrection of Jesus, his spirit came into this world and it continues to this day, reaching out for thirsty people who need his touch.

Martin Luther sparked the reformation of the church because he sampled the grace of God, he came to know the forgiveness of God, and that forgiveness is still there to be sampled and to be received.

In Israel there is a converted church called the House of Grace. Isn't that a beautiful name? Every church should be called a house of grace, and in this church there is a place of refuge and healing for ex criminals.

Jamil writes, "Yet, as we reflect on our journey at the House of Grace, we are reminded of the importance of our work in restoring hope and faith, even during the darkest times.

Through our outreach, we stand alongside families in need, youth at risk, and former prisoners navigating their path back into society. These members of our community carry shared burdens of fear, despair, and uncertainty for the future. Many have lost their sense of hope, and understandably so. The persistent struggles in our region—political strife, economic instability, security challenges, social tension, and countless conflicts—cast long shadows over everyday life."

But there is something greater that remains unchanged: our faith. It is our unwavering belief in a Creator who, through boundless love and grace, promises never to abandon us. We hold firm to the understanding that we are all created equally, in His image, and that this truth will guide us toward brighter days. Faith is not only our anchor but the path that leads us forward, helping us see beyond the hardships.

These difficult times also illuminate the grace that sustains us, reminding us of the blessings we still hold. We cherish what we have, recognising that these gifts are not universal, and we draw strength from the steadfast support of friends, supporters, and loved ones who keep us in their prayers. Rather than highlight our achievements, we wish to acknowledge the collective strength of our community—people and organisations alike—whose faith and compassion kindle hope and courage in the hearts of those suffering.

Since the recent escalation of conflict, particularly in the north, we have seen God's love shine through the solidarity of those who have rallied to support the vulnerable. We have felt the prayers, care, and unwavering commitment of our friends and partners in the House of Grace, reinforcing our mission and affirming our faith. In this season of Christmas, we pray for peace above all. And we open our hearts to the divine light, so we may see God's face reflected in each person beside us and be present for them through every difficulty.

With heartfelt gratitude and prayers for peace,

**Jamal Shehade**

Director

Moments of grace in the house of grace and the challenge for us this morning have we heard the words of Jesus, to come and receive his water of life; and have we heard it as a church, for the name above our church door, should always be the house of grace.