

Sermon 26-6-22 (10.30am Service)

Theme: No Murder (Genesis 4: 1-16 and Mark 15: 1-15)

Over the next few weeks, we are going to think and pray about grace. Grace is something Christians talk about a lot; it is one of our favourite buzz words. And yet, as I reflect on my own behaviour at times, as we reflect on our experience of church life at times, grace is something we are more than happy to receive but can find it difficult to extend to others. And that is our first reflection about grace. We can love the theory more than we love the practice. One can love the idea of grace, without being gracious.

Now, grace simply means “a gift”. And in church life, we often use the word to refer to the gift of God’s love. And the *message* of the Christian faith is that God freely gives to us the gift of his love, but the *task* of the Christian faith is how we extend that gift to others.

So how is it, that we move to this theme? How have we arrived at grace? Over the past term, we have been thinking about the 10 commandments. And it is only natural, that the first figure we should think of when we consider the 10 commandments is Moses. After all, he received them from God in the first place. But our question this term has been to ask, “where and how do the 10 commandments surface in the work and words of Jesus?” And last week saw something of a shift. Last week we moved from the first four commandments to the last six, and with that there’s a definite change in focus, or emphasis. The first four commandments are explicitly religious in character, the last six are more about ethics. The first four are about how we relate to God, and the last six are about how we relate to each other.

So in the coming weeks, as we consider the commandments: “Thou shalt not murder”, “thou shalt not commit adultery”, “thou shalt not steal”, we are going to see how Jesus responds to those people guilty of breaking these very commands. We are going to see how Jesus responds to the people who break the ethical code of Moses. And so we come to the theme of grace. When confronted with the people we are often most likely to judge, when confronted with the people we are most likely to condemn, Jesus offers forgiveness. Jesus offers hope. Jesus offers grace.

And today, with commandments number 6, “Thou shalt not murder”, we see Jesus put side by side a murderer. We see how Jesus stands in the shoes of a murderer.

Now we might be familiar with the name Barabbas; and the scene of Jesus’ trial is something the church remembers by tradition every Easter, as part of the passion narrative, the story of Christ’s death and resurrection. But it is good to focus on this small episode in its own right.

But, to set the scene, let’s meet some of the characters, in person.

First, we think of Pontius Pilate. In HR terms, Pontius Pilate is under observation as someone on a final warning. He has a bad track record, and is hanging in there by a thread. To understand this, we should think about how statecraft works today. When a country wants to establish a good working relationship with another, especially where things are tense politically, you would hope that the government would send over its most able

diplomat. Someone who is able to foster and sustain meaningful relationships under pressure.

Someone who can negotiate compromise, and serve the common interest. Pontius Pilate was not that man.

By this point in the gospels, he has already established for himself a reputation for violence, and a disdain for diplomacy. The contemporary Jewish writer Philo called him, “inflexible and brutal”. And more than once he had showed an astounding ignorance of the religious sensibilities of the people in his jurisdiction, causing open riots purely by his recklessness – riots he quashed by a disproportionate show of force. Pilate was not a man to be trifled with, and in his stubbornness, someone who was not easily told what to do. The Scribes and Pharisees then would have to work hard to control him, to manipulate him. On the one hand they needed him to get rid of Jesus, since only he had the legal power to dish out the death penalty, but on the other hand they needed to make clear he had no other choice but to act. So, they told him that Jesus claimed to be a king. Pilate wouldn’t have cared about Jesus who claimed to be Christ, or Jesus who claimed to be Messiah. But to claim to be king, is treason. Only Caesar is king. And so Pilate, knowing his position hangs by a thread, sensing the crowd developing into a mob is caught in a trap.

But here we move from someone indirectly responsible for murder, to someone directly guilty of the crime. Barabbas. Barabbas was an insurrectionist, a political dissident who was arrested for murder. Now the exact nature or circumstance of his crime we don’t know. Was this an assassination, was this an act of open rebellion, or was it the result of something going terribly wrong, an instance where things went spiraling dreadfully out of control. We just don’t know. But it is his name that interests me. Barabbas literally means Son of the Father. But wait a minute, isn’t that a title we usually use of Jesus. After all, he is the Son of our Heavenly Father. It is almost like it is deliberately given to help us hold these two characters side by side. But here’s where things get even more curious.

Does anyone know what is traditionally thought to be Barabbas’ first name? ...Jesus. Jesus Barabbas. And in fact, some of the earliest manuscripts of Matthew’s gospel confirm this, and the most recent English versions of the NIV translation include this detail. Jesus Barabbas and Jesus Christ are deliberately placed side by side before Pilate, the murderous judge. And so, what we really see are two attempts to establish God’s Kingdom. The way of Jesus Barabbas, who thinks God’s kingdom is established in blood and violence. And Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ, who establishes God’s Kingdom through loving sacrifice. And what follows next is the most famous exchange, the most famous substitution in history.

Those of us who love sport know the difference a timely substitution can make on the outcome of a game. But did you know it’s true of the film industry as well? A timely substitution can make or break a movie. And I want to share with you some famous examples of last-minute substitutions.

And we begin with the classic 90s’ comedy, Sister Act. Now, for those of you who know it, you will agree that Whoopi Goldberg’s performance makes that movie. There is no Sister Act without Whoopi Goldberg. But did you know that she was a substitute for Bette Middler, who was originally cast for the role?

Or what about Forrest Gump, which is a real weepy, brought to life by the actor Tom Hanks, who won an Oscar for his outstanding performance. But again, he wasn't first choice. Imagine the role, the movie, where Forrest Gump is played by John Travolta.

And finally, Indiana Jones, still the vest peak of that genre. If you want adventure, you have to see Indiana Jones. But who else could have brought that role to life than Harrison Ford? Well, imagine the role played by the actor it was written for, none other than Magnum's Tom Selleck. Sure, his moustache would have brought something different to the role of Indiana Jones, but it wouldn't have been the same movie.

Now I mention these examples, because while substitute actors only saved these movies, the most famous example of a substitution saves our souls. You see, when that great exchange was made, and Jesus takes the place of Barabbas, it is not just an account of a single event, but a picture of everything that Jesus would do on the cross for us. It is a picture of grace. It is a picture of how Jesus is our substitute and takes our place before a judge even higher and more righteous than Pilate.

Grace, the gift of God's love, is shown to us clearly in this great exchange, where Jesus doesn't simply take the place of Barabbas, but takes our place too. This is the gift we receive, and this puts into perspective our own task to extend forgiveness to others. If Jesus stepped into my shoes, how then can I step into the shoes of others?

Last week, I talked about the renewed commitment to pastoral care. An important aspect of that is empathy, and the practical question that empathy asks is this: "how would I feel if..." Let's think about that in the context of our pastoral care. How would I feel if I was a Ukrainian refugee forced into being a single parent in a country where I didn't want to be? How would I feel if I had to choose between heating and eating this coming winter? How would I feel if I was struggling with my own identity at the most fundamental level? If Jesus stepped into my shoes, how then can I imagine myself in the shoes of others? If Jesus stepped into the shoes of a murderer, how then can I extend empathy to others?

Let's pause and pray. Holy and heavenly Father, we thank you for grace, the gift of your love and, inasmuch as we wish to receive it, help us to extend it to others. We thank you for the picture of the great exchange, in which we are mindful that Jesus steps into our shoes. Help us as a church, as a parish, to extend empathy to the world. Amen.