

Getting to know our Faith and our Church

The question has been posed: "Grace is described in the dictionary as 'the undeserved mercy of God; divine influence; eternal life or salvation'. Would you care to add to that definition?"

As the questioner turned to a dictionary so I first had a look at Wikipedia and found the statement that "**grace** has been defined, not as a created substance of any kind, but as "the love and mercy given to us by God because God desires us to have it, not necessarily because of anything we have done to earn it"

There are a number of hymns which speak powerfully of grace – such as 'Amazing Grace' which one Dictionary of Hymnology commends for "occasions of worship when we need to confess with joy that we are saved by God's grace alone; as a hymn of response to forgiveness of sin or as an assurance of pardon; as a confession of faith or after the sermon"

In one of the finest of the prayers of the Book of Common Prayer, The General Thanksgiving, there is reference to 'the means of grace':

Almighty God, Father of all mercies, we thine unworthy servants do give thee most humble and hearty thanks for all thy goodness and loving-kindness to us and to all men; We bless thee for our creation, preservation, and all the blessings of this life; but above all for thine inestimable love in the redemption of the world by our Lord Jesus Christ, for the means of grace, and for the hope of glory. And we beseech thee, give us that due sense of all thy mercies, that our hearts may be unfeignedly thankful, and that we shew forth thy praise, not only with our lips, but in our lives; by giving up ourselves to thy service, and by walking before thee in holiness and righteousness all our days; through Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom with thee and the Holy Ghost be all honour and glory, world without end. Amen.

With varying emphasis Christian traditions affirm that the entirety of revealed truth, including the Gospel written and proclaimed, the sacraments especially of Baptism and the Holy Communion, the community of the Church endowed with the Holy Spirit, prayer and works of mercy are all means of grace.

W H 'Bill' Vanstone (1923-1999) was a Canon of Chester Cathedral where I was ordained. One poem that he wrote, sometimes used as a hymn, is appended at the end of his book 'Love's Endeavour, Love's Expense – The Response of Being to the Love of God' – a slim volume well worth reading and re-reading. For me this poem captures much of what is meant by divine grace beginning as it does with a personal reflection on 'means of grace' in nature, music, study etc in the first couple of verses and then a powerful description of the cost of grace that resonates powerfully with human experience in the middle verses before he shifts the focus to the Cross as the ultimate symbol of grace.

Morning glory, starlit sky,
soaring music, scholar's truth,
flight of swallows, autumn leaves,
memory's treasure, grace of youth:

Open are the gifts of God,
gifts of love to mind and sense;
hidden is love's agony,

love's endeavour, love's expense.

Love that gives, gives ever more,
gives with zeal, with eager hands,
spares not, keeps not, all outpours,
ventures all its all expends.

Drained is love in making full,
bound in setting others free,
poor in making many rich,
weak in giving power to be.

Therefore he who shows us God
helpless hangs upon the tree;
and the nails and crown of thorns
tell of what God's love must be.

Here is God: no monarch he,
throned in easy state to reign;
here is God, whose arms of love
aching, spent, the world sustain.