

Farewell Service for the Reverend Rosemary Fletcher, Reverend Alison Facey, Deacon Linda Kinchenton, and Reverend Bruce Anderson on Sunday, 17th July 2022 at 6.30 p.m. at Marlborough Road Methodist Church

Transcript of the Sermon given by The Reverend Erial Kirby

Emotions, feelings, attitudes.

But as to how things go, this must log somewhere up there in the premiership. You don't do things by halves in St Albans, do you? If you are going to get rid of Ministers, then select four! Thank you for allowing me to be part of this gathering, if not the kicking out! But what do you say in a location like this? It's very easy when two charming women grab you at Synod, one on either arm, and say, 'Will you come and preach for our farewell service?' And you say 'Yes', and then think, 'What on earth am I going to say?' Well, my default position is always Scripture.

And what a gem of a text! That is a reading from Acts 20, verse 32. "And now, I commend you to God and to the message of his grace." That's it. I almost feel that I can just say that and sit down. "I commend you to God and to the message of his grace. Amen." But perhaps you expect a little more. It's impossible, I think, to offer a simple, succinct definition of grace. It's so multifaceted, it's immense. The best we can do perhaps is to describe its impact and effect, and to offer comparisons and contrasts. Grace is undeserved favour, unmerited favour. Something we receive not as a right, but as a free gift. We can think of it as something that draws out from us feelings of thankfulness, of gratitude, of being blessed. So, Ali, Bruce, Linda and Rosemary (I'm taking them in alphabetical order) you're all gathered here. Which aspects, which dimensions of grace might we draw from this parting?

Perhaps there's something about fortifying grace. Fortifying grace. Have you wandered into your local chemist shop recently and looked at the vitamins counter? You literally have to make sure that you have got at least half an hour to go through all the options that are there. Every combination of multivitamins is there for you, at a price that you will not believe! I remember in my early childhood back in Antigua that there was only one tonic (forgive me for advertising). It was Ferol. It's a wonderful and rich compound, and for a family that was completely teetotal, it had the added bonus of having a good proportion of alcohol in it! It really gave you a hit. It was worth getting ill so you could get Ferol! It boosted you, it lifted you, it had all these compounds in it, and just reading the list you thought 'I feel better already'. Grace is more fortifying than any multivitamin, even Ferol. And indeed far better tasting than the other dreaded therapy, cod liver oil. Do you remember that? At least now they have the decency to wrap the capsules so they don't have that awful taste as it goes down.

Vitamins fortify you. The message of God's grace, God's undeserved favour, God's stepping aside from his divine majesty and stooping to rescue you and me and everyone who was lost. And to help them to become that which they were destined to be. That message, of grace, it is that which should make you feel strong, uplifted, in all the circumstances of your life. God did that for us. Amazing grace. Amazing love. With having given Christ, and having sacrificed Christ, would he not also give us everything else that we need? This is just the starter, and all the rest is yet to come. It is added grace upon grace upon grace, all the grace that you need to strengthen and to fortify, to make you what you were designed to be.

God is for us. What an extraordinary week it has been for us in the world of sport. The Northern Hemisphere defeating the Southern Hemisphere at rugby football and what's going on here? Even at cricket, England has managed to win! God comes in and says, 'I'm on your side. I'm on your team, I'm there for you. I'm there rooting for you, supporting you and everything that you need, I'm there. Draw on my strength.' It is grace that builds us up, that makes us stand tall. As they say now, 'big us up'. Makes us feel bigger, broader and brawnier. Grace is offered to us to build us up. And grace, in fortifying us, brings us hope. It secures our inheritance. We have the assurance and the title deeds to the inheritance we share with all God's chosen ones. Those who are being made holy only by grace. We have a hope and assurance that God's will and purpose is being worked out, and grace says it will come to fulfilment. It will find completion. We are not caught up in a random series of acts in our world. Everything is not falling apart. What is the world coming to? It is coming to Christ. It is being drawn into Christ who is going to be the centre of all things. That's what grace assures us.

I commend you to God and to the message of his grace. Fortifying grace. Whenever we feel weak, debilitated. Whenever people focus on our frailties and our failures, that is the time to draw on the fortifying grace of God. And how blessed, how truly blessed we are. In those moments when we sense our need of grace and of fortifying, then God's angels and messengers come. We are not meant or designed to survive on our own. Our strength is in our community, in our bonds with one another. It is as we bear each other's burdens. Ali got it absolutely right in her choice of song, 'Brother, sister, let me serve you'. May we all receive fortifying grace at this time of parting. 'Those who wait on the Lord', says Isaiah, 'will have their strength renewed. They will soar with wings like eagles. They will run and not grow tired; they will walk and not faint'. Do you notice the progression? Those times of exultation when we are high up there, and are ready to dance with the Zimbabwe choir and think everything is fine. Those feelings cannot last forever because the time comes when we can just about keep running. And it's not a sprint, it's a marathon. But you will not grow tired as you run. Then you will walk. Fly, run, walk. Rosemary now faces the next stage of her life – we have yet to see if it is running or walking, or hobbling! But the promise, the promise is still there for fortifying grace. Fortifying grace. That's grace that will bring strength for each day. When we are all to be exalted. When we are called to run on those errands of Gospel, mercy and mission. When we are called to walk with patience alongside those who suffer, those who need our support. I commend you to the message of God's fortifying grace.

But grace comes in another brand, another flavour. There is forgiving grace. Even with the best will and intentions, still things go wrong within us and between us, within the body of Christ. But there is grace for every such situation. What are the things that stay in your mind? Is there a temptation perhaps to dwell on those sins, those moments of pain, of difficulty, of struggle. And for those who are moving on, as you look on the ministry you have offered, are there scars, the wounds that you feel have been inflicted, that you feel are part of your life from now on? Earlier, as we heard from the reading of Acts Chapter 20, Paul said to his friends before leaving Ephesus that he coveted no one's silver or gold or clothing and that he worked with his own hands to support himself and his companions. It's about the conflicts that he experienced, the resistance that he met, the undermining of his message and the questioning of his ministry that he faced. But in all of this his abiding testimony was this – God said to me my grace is enough. My grace is enough. It's all you need. Grace will see you through.

Having talked about grace like a multivitamin, let me now change it. It's not at all like a vitamin, it's more like Polyfilla. Well, there are other fillers available. Grace is what makes good the holes in our lives, the brokenness, when gaps emerge and things get fractured, grace is what fills in the missing bit and blends the two parts together again and holds them together in a bond that's stronger than it was before the breakage happened. That's forgiveness. The most miraculous of products and it's

free, it's free at point of need. It's not cheap. It's the most costly thing in the world. It cost the life of our Lord to secure this grace that makes possible the mending of broken lives. It takes a lot to heal those who have been harmed by life. And God in Christ has made it possible.

I come from a very large family, 5 brothers and 5 sisters. And the demands on our parents were sometimes quite extreme. Mum, who was a saint, died all too young but was not reluctant to administer punishment when needed for those who stepped out of line. But sometimes Mum did not immediately resort to the strap or whatever was to hand as a means of punishment. Sometimes Mum would utter a sincere prayer 'Father, give me grace with this child.' I was shocked many years later, when my grandson was playing on the floor with his toys. Among the toys were some empty yoghurt cups he had found. They had the capacity to stack in a way just like building bricks. So he was playing with the little cups but they weren't co-operating. Suddenly, there was this crying, 'Father, give me grace with these yoghurt cups'. I don't know where he got it from. I think it was my side of the family! And the miracle was that having called out, 'Father give me grace with these yoghurt cups,' the laughter that followed was a healing moment and suddenly the yoghurt cups were all doing what they were supposed to be doing. Grace. It gets us over that point of damage and hurt. Friends, I commend to you, for all those yoghurt cup moments of your life. From now on, just say it, 'Father, give me grace'. Whether it's a person, or a situation, or a thing. Grace is available. Grace is available. I commend you to the message of grace. It fortifies, and therefore is.

And lastly Grace is forward looking. In Acts 20 verse 36, Paul is saying farewell to the elders of Ephesus and, having finished speaking to them, he knelt down with them and prayed. This is where God met Paul spiritually and God is with him and his company. Paul is pouring out his heart to his followers. It's their parting moment. Communion with God is one of the channels that allows grace to flow into our lives. Grace is not commanding God. It is listening to and responding to what God is saying. So often prayer does become our feedback. Prayer sometimes becomes our trying to tell the Lord just what we think, and what we want God to do about what we think. Prayer is adjusting the way we see things through God's perspective. It is seeing people and events through God's eyes, and feeling with God's heart, so that we act with God's compassion and grace. That's what prayer is about. And the grace that is forward looking and forward reaching is available to us through that prayer. All of them knelt and prayed together. Reaching out to and looking forward to the extending of grace. Forward looking grace that is reflected in their seeking God's will.

Ali, Bruce, Linda and Rosemary - God's not finished with you yet. Sorry. God has further ministries for you, wherever you are. And part of the grace that you pray for commends to you, is that grace that will help you discover the richness, the fullness that God still has in store for you. A forward looking grace that is seeking God's will. And a forward looking grace that is about supporting God's workers. You will not be left desolate, that is the promise of confidence. Who is going where? Someone is pencilled in. Some lucky person, some blessed soul, is coming to St. Albans. And your ministry here will be to discover God's grace with that person. And your ministry now is to send those, who leave, forward with the assurance that you are supporting them with your prayers. It's the new charity of grace, it flows both ways. A wonderful, tender picture of Christian communion and community is there in those verses. They embraced Paul and kissed him. This parting is a time of such complex emotions. In it all hear the words of St Paul to you now and through the days ahead. "I commend you to God, and to the message of his grace. Fortifying, forgiving, forward looking grace." Amen.