

His Grace is Sufficient

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Preacher: Paul Barker

[0 : 00] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on the 18th of June 2000.

The preacher is Paul Barker. His sermon is entitled His Grace is Sufficient and is from Philippians chapter 4 verses 21 to 23.

Amen. Almighty God, we pray that your word will indeed shed light in our hearts, that we may do it for your glory. Amen.

Please be seated and you may like to have open the passage from Philippians chapter 4 verse 21 to 23 on page 956. It was just before Christmas time and the Minister for Administrative Affairs, Jim Hacker, was taken into his office by his private secretary, Bernard, and shown a table laden with piles of Christmas cards.

They're all clearly labelled, Minister. These you sign Jim. These you sign Jim Hacker. These, Jim and Annie.

[1 : 29] These are Annie and Jim Hacker. These, love from Annie and Jim. These, Mrs. Hacker should write and you should append your name.

The Minister spotted two more piles on the table. What about those, he asked. Those are printed. And those have cyclostyled signatures so that you needn't write anything.

Just check to whom they're being sent to make sure they're not going to people to whom you should have sent a personally signed card. You know, sign Jim or Jim Hacker or Jim and Annie or Annie and Jim Hacker.

There was yet another large batch at the end of the table and the Minister asked, what are those? His private secretary, Bernard, was completely in command. Those are the constituency cards.

Your election agent dropped them off this morning. And then at the end of all this procedure, there is a bag of the personal family cards. 1,172 of them.

[2 : 32] Well, from Yes Prime Minister. The difficulties of making sure that you finish a letter or sign a card in the right way. How we finish a letter is important.

I remember when I was at primary school being taught to sign letters, yours sincerely or yours faithfully or yours truly. Not that I ever see anybody write a letter yours truly, it seems these days.

But what do you write? Do you write yours sincerely or yours faithfully? Or do you write love or warmest regards or best wishes? When Paul wrote to the church in Philippi in northern Greece, he finished his letter in the words that we heard in the second reading.

Greet every saint in Christ Jesus. The friends who are with me greet you. All the saints greet you, especially those of the emperor's household. I hope you enjoy the football on Saturday and that your health's good.

No, he doesn't say that. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. I used to write lots of letters when I lived in England. I'd write three or four or more sometimes a week.

[3 : 40] Air letters back to friends and family in Australia. And usually the content of my letters would be the things that I've done. And wishing that everything is okay with my friends and family and so on back in Australia.

These days I rarely write a letter. Hardly ever. Emails perhaps, but hardly a letter. But even of all the letters I've ever written, very few would ever approach the sort of thing that we find in the letter of Paul to the Philippians.

The letter to the Philippians, unlike many of Paul's letters, which are sometimes harsh and full of correction and rebuke, this letter oozes with joyful warmth, with affection and encouragement.

He expresses his thanks for their generosity. He shares his joy with them and theirs with him. He encourages them to persevere in Christian faith.

And he urges them to maintain Christian unity. Indeed, the whole letter, every single word without exception, is motivated by Christian concern.

[4 : 54] There's nothing trivial. It is full of Christian conviction and content. When was the last time you wrote to somebody or even rang them or sent them an email to express some Christian concern and conviction?

To express Christian encouragement? A letter that's motivated by Christian love. When was the last time in a letter you said to somebody that you prayed for them?

When was the last time that you expressed your thanks for them and for their Christian faith and ministry and fellowship and friendship? When was the last time that you encouraged somebody by saying how much you were encouraged in your Christian faith by their witness or example or ministry?

When was the last time that you wrote to Christian missionaries, for example? The Youngs who were about to go back to Nigeria? The Glovers who were about to go back to Nepal?

Ted and Moore and Watkins in outback South Australia? When was the last time that you wrote to your Bible study leader or group leader and said how much you appreciated their Christian fellowship and leadership?

[6 : 06] What Christian encouragement do you write at the end of birthday cards or Christmas cards? Merry X-mas? Fred?

Or do you write something to do with Jesus and Christian commitment and encouragement? Too often it seems to me the communication that Christians have with each other in our day and age is thoroughly worldly.

We talk about our health, the weather and the football full stop. Even after church, that's often the substance of our conversations. It ought to be not limited to that.

It ought to be full of Christian encouragement because Christian faith needs encouragement if it is going to persevere. That's what this letter shows us to the Philippians.

That unless we encourage each other in Christian faith, we will not persevere in Christian faith. I'm not a great encourager, something I have to work hard at.

[7 : 12] And the letter to the Philippians challenges me to do better. And as I was preparing this last night, I decided I should write four letters of encouragement to different people.

I try, I suppose, at times, like Christmas cards to members of the parish. I remember when I finished my curacy many years ago now, I wrote various letters to people in the parish whose example of Christian life had been an encouragement to me, to say that to them.

And one lady in tears said to me that never, ever had anyone, and this was a lady in her 70s, had anyone ever said anything of encouragement to her about the value of her Christian faith and life and witness.

One of the things I think is terrific about our new archbishop is that he is a man full of encouragement. He's a very warm encourager.

One of the staff members, a senior staff member in the diocesan offices, apparently was in tears the other day because it was the first time in the years that she'd worked there that a bishop or archbishop had ever given thanks to her for her work in the diocesan office.

[8 : 20] Receiving encouragement in our Christian life not only just gives us a boost and a lift, but it is so important to keep us going and persevering in Christian faith.

It's much easier to be critical. It's much easier to complain. It's much easier to be grumpy and pick faults in the little things. But as Christians, we ought to be encouraging and positive people.

We ought to be full of praise for each other, warmly encouraging each other, building each other up so that we may persevere in Christian faith.

We ought to be followers of Paul's example. Let me encourage you to read through the letter to the Philippians in the next week and think about the people that you ought to be encouraging in ways that perhaps you take them for granted.

Now what lies underneath all this issue of encouragement is the fact that Christians are in fellowship with each other. We're not Lone Ranger Christians.

[9 : 24] We belong together. We're in fellowship with each other. And the concerns of one are the concerns of another. That's especially the case in the letter to the Philippians.

And we see it in particular with two key ideas to do with fellowship. The first is the word fellowship or participation or sharing. The Greek word is *koinonia*.

And many times is it used in this letter. So in chapter 1 verse 5, Paul expresses his fellowship in the gospel with the Philippians. They're not doing the same task, but because they're together in Christian fellowship, they have fellowship with him in his ministry.

Just like you and I have fellowship with the ministry in Nigeria or Pakistan or Nepal or outback South Australia with our link missionaries. Paul goes on in chapter 1 verse 7 to say that he has fellowship or participation with the Philippians in grace.

That is, they have a common grace through Jesus Christ that they share in together. Chapter 2 begins with him expressing his *koinonia* or fellowship or participation in the spirit of God.

[10 : 38] They're recipients of the same spirit. In chapter 3, he expresses his sharing or fellowship or participation in the sufferings of Jesus. It's not just that Jesus suffered and died for us, but that even as Christians we share in those sufferings.

In chapter 4 verse 14 and 15, he expresses the fact that he shares or the Philippians share with him in suffering, in his troubles, but also in giving and receiving.

That's the first idea about fellowship that runs through this letter. The second is the stress on unity. When Paul begins the letter to the Philippians, he says to all the saints.

Now the word all is the sort of word that we just skip over because it's a common word, it's a small word, and we probably don't pay it much attention. But it's actually a word that occurs many times in this letter to stress the fact that each and every Christian in Philippi is united together with Paul in the cause of Christ.

So he dresses all the saints in Christ Jesus. Not just one of them, but every one of them. And then when he prays for them in verse 4 of chapter 1, he constantly prays with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you.

[12 : 02] He doesn't just pray for the leaders or the significant people or his friends, he prays for all of them without exception. He has positive feelings about the church in Philippi.

Because you hold me in your heart, he says in verse 7 of chapter 1, for all of you share in God's grace with me. Again, stressing the unity of all the Philippians in the church in Philippi in North Greece.

All of them share in the grace with him. And in verse 8 of chapter 1, he longs for all of them with the compassion of Christ. They're just the first few examples. The word occurs many times in this letter.

And it's the background to these last closing words at the end of chapter 4 that we're looking at this morning. So then, chapter 4, verse 21. Greet every saint in Christ Jesus.

I wonder what you would think if a letter was written to Holy Trinity Doncaster and it said, greet every saint. Maybe you'd look around the pews to think, well, which are the saints here?

[13 : 09] Oh yeah, there's one over there and there's one there. No, that's not what Paul means here. When Paul says, greet every saint, he means every Christian in the church in Philippi.

If Paul were writing to Holy Trinity Doncaster and he said, greet every saint, he would mean you. And you, and you, and you, and every one of you without exception. Because the New Testament's view is unlike our church tradition's view.

that every Christian is a saint. You don't need a pope to make you a saint. God makes you a saint when he makes you a Christian. He sets you apart for service to him.

That's what a saint is. It's not a specially holy Christian person. You're a saint if you're a Christian. So Paul is addressing each and every one. It's encouraging, isn't it?

It's challenging to think, oh, I'm a saint. But it's an encouragement too, isn't it? And he doesn't leave anybody out. Most of his letters ends with saying, greet Fred and tell this person this and Joe this and so on.

[14 : 14] But not the letter to the Philippians. Greet every saint, he says. Secondly, he then goes on to say, the friends who are with me greet you.

That's a weak translation, unfortunately. The difficulty is we don't have an English word that captures exactly what's being expressed there. The old translations would say, the brethren who are with me greet you.

But the trouble is the word brethren has male connotations today. The word is inclusive, male and female, but it's not friends. It's a family term.

Siblings is a little bit sort of remote, but that probably is about as good as we can get. You see, it's not just saying Christian friends who are with me greet you. He's saying Christian brethren, that is, they're family members, that is, we belong to the same family.

They are greeting you, he is saying. Now he means by that the people who are with him. Timothy, we know, was with him. He mentions him in the first verse. Epaphroditus was with him.

[15 : 21] He mentions in chapter 2. But what he's saying is they're not just your friends, they're your family members. Christians belong with you in the same family.

And the perspective of Paul here, but Jesus also and the New Testament as a whole, is that Christians belong together in the same family and that family, that spiritual family, is more significant and more eternal than our human family.

the fact that you and I together are brothers and sisters in Christ is ultimately more significant than the fact that I am the brother of Jane and Anne because we've got the same human parents.

Christian family is more important than human family. Now I'm not saying, oh you should just forget about your mothers and fathers and children and grandchildren and brothers and sisters and uncles and aunts. I'm not saying that.

But I'm saying that in the end, spiritual family is more important than human family. It is the one that will be there in heaven. Human family is not necessarily so and if so, they're there because they're spiritual family, not because they're human family.

[16 : 38] Our real identity lies together as Christian people in the same heavenly family. Then he goes on to say in verse 22, all the saints greet you.

Now Paul is writing this letter towards the end of his life, maybe around 60 AD or thereabouts, give or take a couple of years I suppose. He's in prison, either in Rome where he ends up at the end of the Acts of the Apostles or perhaps a little bit earlier than that in Caesarea on the sea in Israel which was where he was in prison for a couple of years, you may remember, in the later chapters of the Acts of the Apostles.

When he writes all the saints greet you, he is I think saying that the church where he is greets the church in Philippi. So the church in Rome or the church in Caesarea is greeting the church in Philippi.

That is it has fellowship together. Now we don't need to think that the church in Caesarea or Rome knew all the Christians in Philippi in order to greet them.

Far from it. It's almost certain that they wouldn't have known or maybe just one or two would have ever met any of the Christians in Philippi. But the point is you don't need to know somebody in order to have Christian fellowship with them.

[17 : 58] You belong together in the same family with them whether or not you've ever met them. When I lived in England before coming to Doncaster, after I'd been there a few months, the rector of our parish retired.

And so we had an interregnum for a few months and sometime after the retirement of the rector, the new rector was announced. And it was said that in three months or thereabouts, whatever it was, he would begin his ministry in Cheltenham.

I suggested that we should get a big card for everybody to sign to say, welcome Timothy and Sue to Cheltenham. We're looking forward to you coming here.

But I have to say that that was frowned upon by other staff members and church wardens there because we didn't know them. And we couldn't expect people to sign a card for people that they didn't know.

Well, as one of those sort of upstart Australians, I just held my tongue and sort of acceded to these reserved Englishmen's requests. But they were wrong, I have to say.

[19 : 01] We could easily sign a card for Christians we don't know because we have fellowship with them already, even if we don't know them, because we already belong together in Christ.

So let me encourage you not to restrain yourself from writing to missionaries because you've never met them. That doesn't matter. If you belong here and you're writing to one of our link missionaries, you already have fellowship with them because you pray for them regularly.

So feel encouraged to write, at least when they get back to the mission field. I remember being on holidays once with a good friend of mine in Wales and we were driving along a country road in Wales and the car in front of us had a fish sticker on the back.

And we said, we'll be with them in heaven. They're our brothers and sisters in that car. We don't know who they were. We didn't even honk the horn or anything like that. But we just thought we actually belong together even though we've never met each other probably.

That's the same with Christians around the world. We belong together even if we don't know each other. And we have fellowship together even if we don't know each other. Verse 22 ends with Paul saying, especially those of the emperor's household or literally Caesar's household.

[20 : 17] Now it could be that he was in Rome and he's meaning people who belong to the family or the fringe of the family of Caesar at the time. Nero it would have been. But it's just as likely that what he means by that are the officials or servants.

Paul was in prison. It may be the prison guards who are in the service of the government and therefore of Nero or Caesar. So he could be in Caesarea or Rome and he's talking about those sorts of civil servants.

Paul is a prisoner and yet he implies by this that he has Christian fellowship with Christian Roman officials if not prison guards.

Shows the extent of the spread of the gospel by this time that even members of the Roman civil service in Nero's day are Christian. But what it reminds us of too is that Christian fellowship transcends nationalism and patriotism.

You could have Roman slaves and Roman senior officials or even members of the family of the Caesar. Greeks, Romans, Jews, Gentiles, young, old, male, female, slaves or free.

[21 : 32] The Christian gospel brings together people from any and every tribe, language or socio-economic group. That is, Christian family transcends all the social and racial barriers in our society.

There is never, ever, any place for racism in the Christian church. Ever. Under any circumstance. And so to hear just this week that some people are suggesting that it's on issues of race that we're trying to extend our building is absolutely disgusting.

And if it's you, stop it. There is no place for that in Christian fellowship ever, anywhere. We belong together whether we're white or black, what country we were born in, what poverty or riches we were born into.

And that is more important and more eternal and more lasting. And there is no place for any division in the Christian church on any of those grounds at all.

Ever. Our citizenship, Paul says in chapter 3 here, belongs in heaven. That's where we belong. Not in white Australia or England or Sri Lanka or India or South Africa or any other country.

[22 : 46] We belong in heaven and we belong together. We are united in Christ as Christian people. Too often the church has failed, of course, at that.

Church history is full of divisions on racial or socio-economic grounds in recent times and in ancient times. But what unites us in Christ is far greater than anything social or racial that might seem to divide us.

Our superior loyalty lies with Jesus Christ and we must make sure that we practice that. Charles Wesley, the hymn writer, put it in these words, all praise to our redeeming Lord who joins us by his grace and bids us each to each restored together seek his face.

He bids us build each other up and gathered into one to our high calling's glorious hope we hand in hand go on.

Paul concludes this letter with a prayer. It is starkly simple. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

[24 : 04] He prays for grace. That's all. The letter begins with an expression of grace. To all the saints he says grace to you.

Chapter 1 verse 2 because grace is the essence of Christian faith. It is the heart of what it is to be a Christian and what God is on about.

Grace is the word not that is about beauty or elegance like we might use for a ballet dancer. Grace is about God's generosity to us in Christ that we do not deserve and have no claim upon.

God's free gift to us of salvation in Christ. That's grace. That's what John Newton the hymn wrote about when he said amazing grace how sweet the sound that saves a wretch like me.

And that's what all of us are in relationship with God. We are subjects of grace. Recipients of grace. It's where we begin the Christian life and it's where we end it.

[25 : 11] We never move from it. So Paul is writing here about persevering in grace. grace. And the whole of the letter of the Philippians is about persevering in grace.

He prays in chapter 1 verse 6 that God who began a good work in you that's grace will bring it to completion on the day of Christ. That is grace again. The same sort of thing a bit later in chapter 1.

He prays that their love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best and so on that on the day of Christ you may stand pure and blameless. He's praying that they'll persevere in grace.

Similarly in chapter 2 verse 12 onwards just as you've always obeyed me not only in my presence but much more now in my absence work out your own salvation with fear and trembling. But lest we think that's to do with their own works he says for it is God who is at work in you enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

That's grace again. He's praying for the perseverance of grace. Chapter 3 verse 14 I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

[26 : 19] That's not just his effort. In the context of those words he's persevering in grace and similarly at other points in the letter. We all need the prayers and encouragement of each other to persevere in grace.

Don't take it for granted that once you're a Christian you'll always be a Christian and so you sit back and become complacent. Paul urges us to persevere in grace.

I've known clergy church wardens wives of clergy vestry members youth group leaders people who've been baptised as adults who have given up on grace.

Let's not think that we are necessarily exempt from that. Let's make sure that we keep on in grace and we encourage each other to keep on in grace.

grace. The last words of this letter are a very simple prayer and it's because grace is sufficient. It is all we need.

[27 : 29] Sometimes we say well so long as you've got your health that's all that matters. Occasionally if I'm feeling bold I'll reject that view because it's not true. Our health one day will stop.

What matters is grace and keeping in grace. That's the bottom line. That's all we need now and forever. Paul has just said in chapter 4 verse 19 my God will fully satisfy every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus.

That's grace. It's all we need. Christian faith begins in grace continues in grace and it ends in grace.

The gift which he on one bestows we all delight to prove. The grace through every vessel flows in purest streams of love.

Even now we think and speak the same and cordially agree consented all through Jesus name in perfect harmony. those words about him indeed the words that Paul ends this letter with show us how grace works.

[28 : 51] It's because of Jesus Christ. He is the ink with which this letter was written. The fellowship that I've talked about depends on Jesus. The unity depends on Jesus.

The grace derives from Jesus. And throughout this letter we see that grace is sufficient because Jesus is sufficient. So to live is Christ Paul says in chapter 1 verse 21.

Our hope is in Christ he says in chapter 2 verse 19. We rejoice in Christ chapter 3 verse 1. We glory in Christ chapter 1 verse 26 and 3 verse 3.

Jesus is the model for how we are to live our lives. Chapter 2 verse 5 onwards. Jesus is the motivation for obedience. Chapter 1 verse 27.

We are to stand firm in Christ chapter 4 verse 1. Jesus is both our saviour chapter 3 verse 20 and our Lord chapter 4 verse 23.

[29 : 51] He's totally sufficient. Indeed you could summarise this letter by this. Paul exhorts us to look back to Jesus his death and resurrection chapter 2 for example.

He urges us to look up to Jesus reigning as our Lord. Chapter 2 verse 11 for example. He urges us to look forward to Jesus return.

Chapter 1 verse 6 or 320 and encourages us to look around to see Jesus work in and through and among us all. Chapter 3 verse 9 for example.

Grace is sufficient because Jesus is sufficient. it is all we need today tomorrow and forever.

We all partake the joy of one the common peace we feel a peace to central minds unknown a joy unspeakable and if our fellowship below in Jesus be so sweet what heights of rapture shall we know when round his throne we meet.

[31 : 00] Amen. Amen.