

Today we celebrate God's grace for us and our adoption in His family as children of God.

The Bible tells us that God is love, but do we really accept the good news that God is head over heels in love with you; that Jesus Christ died for us so we would accept the Father's love for us; that God's Holy Spirit lives in us and is eager to grow us in the fruit of love.

Brennan Manning, a priest and retreat leader tells on an occasion when he made a 30 day silent retreat in the snow covered hills of Pennsylvania, One word sounded and resounded in his heart throughout that month. Jesus did not say this on Calvary, but he is saying it now: I'm dying to be with you. *I'm really dying to be with you.*

The good news is that we have been saved by grace. Saved to be what: saved to be children of God. What grace tells us is that God's love for us does not depend on anything we do. God takes us as people who do not do the right things in life and instead declares us to be righteous by the goodness of Jesus.

The reason why we confess our sins before the Lord is not to make ourselves worthy of His love, of His acceptance, of our entrance to heaven but because we loved, accepted, heaven-bound. The more we love God as Father the more we see in the realities of our lives that we let Him down as son, as daughter. We don't confess to be loved but because we are loved. As Paul says we are being made new in the attitude of our minds, we are putting on our new selves, created to be like God: as the Father, so the Son, as the Son so the Son's adopted brothers and sisters: we are to be imitators of God, living according to God's will for us. And that's why in our tradition we don't after our confession offer absolution but rather an assurance of pardon.

Let's confess our sins before God, for if as scripture says we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. If we claim we have not sinned, we make Him out to be a liar and His word has no place in our lives. [1 John 1:8-10 NIV]

Lord God, most merciful Father, we confess that we have sinned, through our own fault, and in common with others, in thought, word and action, and in what we have not done. By Your Holy Spirit make us truly aware of our sin, and bring us to a broken spirit and a contrite heart; restore us to the joy of Your salvation and return us back to You, for the sake of Your beloved Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us. Amen. Let us offer one another an Assurance of Pardon. **Please turn to each other and say: Your sins are forgiven; live in Christ and seek to sin no more.**

The parable of the prodigal son summarises how God's love works for us. The prodigal has disdained his father's love and walked out of his father's

home. This is a picture of all people walking away from God and His ways and instead taking up residence in the way of the world. And everything goes well for the boy until he discovers that the world doesn't love him. When his money runs out his friends desert him. When the famine comes he cant but food. Unemployed he cant get a good job. Finally he's reduced to denying his very self, working as a Jew in a pig farm and envying the pigs their food. This is a picture of hell. The alternative to life is not death. Death is merely the transition episode between eternal life with God and eternal life without God. For those who trust in God, Jesus offers fullness of life. But for those who do not trust in God life reduces. This is what John is contrasting in 3:16: trusting in Jesus has life after death consequences, those who do have eternal life, those who do not have a life that suffers perishing.

Jesus tells us that the boy came to his senses. How many people do we know who refuse to do the same? The boy has suddenly seen the reality of life and because it is not too late he decides to repent. He realises he has been wrong, he works out a prayer of confession and turns back home. But what then happens. While the boy was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son and threw his arms around him and kissed him. [picture]

The son wants to pray his prayer of confession but the father is already embracing him with grace: he orders new clothes for him, he restores him to position with a signature ring, and he organises a feast for him. This is God's love working out in mercy and grace.

But the eldest son is not at all glad. He rejects his brother, he refuses the party, he wants to revel in correction not celebration.

This is a parable about God's love and how it works for us in mercy and grace. Have we really grasped what it is to live in God's grace?

Mercy: God does not give us what we do deserve

Grace: God does give us what we do not deserve

Many things flow from our being saved by grace, but all I want to do today is stress what may well be the primary and the first: our status has changed God the Holy Trinity makes us His children.

To be called a child of God is not merely an honorific title. It is a status we possess, not given to us by nature as human beings nor by birth by the quality of our parents, but given to us by God. We may call ourselves princes and princesses, and so we are but it is not a status for our preening but for our humbling. Perhaps the most horrific thing about Princess Fergie offering to sell access to her former husband is the sign it gives that she sees her status as a princess as something with worldly value. When Jesus was asked about who was important in heaven he took a child and said, I tell you truly that unless you change and become like children you will

never enter the kingdom of heaven.

Children in Jewish society were nobodies. They had no social status. Shops were dedicated to selling toys and children's wear; national societies did not campaign to protect them; they did not count. Yet Jesus presented the child as a model of the Christian disciple. In the eyes of the world they were oppressed; rejected; scorned and discounted. And Jesus calls us to recognise ourselves as the same, because He the very Son of God was the first of the model for us. Not because He loved weakness but because He loved and trusted His Father.

He didn't live in the power of the world, or in His own power – that's what He rejected at his temptation – He lived only to please His Father: I tell you the truth, He said to His enemies, the Son can do nothing by Himself; He can do only what He sees His Father doing, because whatever His Father does the Son also does. By myself I can do nothing .. for I seek not to please myself but Him who sent me. This is a portrait of the true child of God. It is a portrait of how we are to be as Christians: "I am the vine," Jesus says, "and you are the branches. This is a picture of family. If a man abides in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing." We are saved by grace to abide in Jesus. The first dimension of being a Christian is exactly that: to be in Christ. Before we are doers of the word in the world we are to be be-ers of the word in our selves.

To believe deeply that God is present in us by the Holy Spirit is to see that we are each a beloved child of God, called to trust our Father. This is the truth that sets us free to live. Most of the time we are afraid of life, but Jesus says: trust in God, trust also in me. In our Father in heaven we have everything we need for life.

I invite you to meditate upon this reality:

gently close your eyes

assume a comfortable position – keeping your spine straight

Imagine Jesus looking at you.

For 2 minutes pray over to yourself the opening words of psalm 23:

The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing.

Do not set your heart on what you will eat or drink; do not worry about it.

For the pagan world runs after all such things, and your Father knows that you need them, but seek His Kingdom and all these things will be given to you as well. And, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him