

Strictly embargoed 20:00hrs

Wednesday, 22 June 2022

Address by the Rt Rev Dr John Kirkpatrick, following his election as Moderator of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland for 2022/2023, at the Opening Meeting of the General Assembly this evening, Assembly Buildings, Belfast.

Grace Works

One Summer evening, a number of years ago when I was involved with the Christian gathering of New Horizon, in the main pavilion were 3,000 people and we estimated perhaps another 1,000 overflowing and sitting outside. John Piper, the pastor from Minneapolis was speaking and as he spoke, the rain started to fall and folk were getting soaked –but still they sat listening, so intent was their attention.

He said this:

“It is not grace to bar what is not bliss
nor flight from all distress but this:
The grace that orders our trouble and pain,
And then, in the darkness, is there to sustain.”

If God's grace works in the hard places then it is seen to stand a real test. The message that I will try to share this year is neither new nor is it complicated - it is the story of Grace not Works.

This is the story of every Christian and we need often to be reminded about it, to reflect and meditate on it:

- It is a story that anchors our lives in troubled times
- That fills our hearts with courage to face the hard time
- Moves us to forgive and love our opponent
- It produces a generous spirit
- It has sent people to the ends of the earth

And

- It has enabled others to discover their prayer voice.

One of the many places we read of it in a precise manner is in Ephesians 1 the story from God's point of view - hence with a particular authority.

1. Grace at work in the past (verses 3-4)

This story begins further than our imagination can take us. "Before the foundation of the world" (v4). As Paul writes here, this is the work of our Heavenly Father - "Blessed be the God and other of our lord Jesus Christ ..." (v3)

- Not a chance event! Chosen means wanted
- Chosen by grace not by merit - by the kindness of God, not the goodness of us
- Chosen with a purpose - "that we should be holy and blameless before him" (v4)

which might sound quite dull to some; but it speaks of a life freed to be what we were created to be more human, capable of handling, enjoying freedom, free, choosing safely.

2. Grace at work in the now (verses 5-7)

We are family now, as our choice involved the Father, adoption involves the Son, we are no longer alone.

It is made possible through redemption, through His blood, the blood of Christ, the forgiveness of sins according to the riches of his grace, because of the story of Jesus enables God to rewrite our failed and broken lives.

- His perfect life ... lived for us
- His sacrificial death ... in our place
- His resurrection as our ...security that all this is really true.

3. Grace shapes our future (verse 10)

Verse 10 speaks of a plan for the future - where there is no uncertainty. A plan we are fully included in for the grace of God enables us to fulfil the work "...we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them" (Ephesians 2:10.)

It is a plan fully guaranteed, sealed with the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 1:14) sealed which comes from 'Arabon'. Originally, 'earnest-money' deposited by the purchaser and forfeited if the purchase was not completed - a Phoenician word, probably introduced into Greece.

In general usage it came to denote 'a pledge' or 'earnest' of any sort; in the New Testament it is used only of that which is assured by God to believers; it is said of the Holy Spirit as the divine 'pledge' of all their future blessedness, particularly of their eternal inheritance. Like an engagement ring.



His spirit, the Holy Spirit in verses 13 to 14, is the guarantee, and who unites us to Jesus forever, as we place our faith in Him. This truly is our story, this is our message, this is big enough to carry the weight of human need, to both change and unite everyone on this island who embraces Jesus.

Ends.

Check against delivery