



*Exodus 3:1-6, Romans 12:1-5, John 15:13-17*

Religious communities are not new, and they are not rare. They are ancient and current reflections of the love of God seen in the Trinity, in which people risk everything to seek to emulate that love, a love which is so great that it overflows infinitely into the world from the Father in the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus, and in the sending of the Holy Spirit. Changed by the love which finds and directs us, changed by that grace, we too are to be sources of love and healing.

I received an email yesterday from the Abbot of a Benedictine Community, which described the Community of St Anselm as “this amazingly prophetic community which is about to be born”. It is not new, it is far from unique in that many wonderful communities are being born, but I hope and pray that it speaks God’s truth to itself and the world – in other words, that it is prophetic. And I pray that Benedictine Abbot is right.

If it is prophetic it is because it challenges both the church and the world with the grace of God, and does so from Lambeth Palace, which has at different times in its history been a place of privilege, of power – even oppression in darker times. There is still the prison in Lollards Tower, still usable [laughter]. Set into the walls ancient Latin sentences scratched in the panelling. A cruel prison of the unhappy followers of Wycliffe. At a time when the Bible in English, pioneered by Wycliffe, was a problem for the church.

Grace is the most beautiful word in the language of God – it means love given freely and without expectation of return. In that prison there was no grace. In this community we offer the invitation to grace. And the vows that you as members of this community will take in a moment are only able to be fulfilled with grace.

Moses, in our first reading, is called to a people who reject him, in a land where those people have no power, and having been rejected once is now on his own. Grace reaches out to those who are nowhere and going nowhere, to the lost, even when they think they have everything sorted, or that there is no hope. Israel is told by God in the Book of Deuteronomy that they were not called because they were strong but because they were weak (a theme picked up by Paul in II Corinthians 9, and in the Acts of the Apostles with the disciples before the Sanhedrin).

Lostness may not be conscious, but it is real and it is seen all around us. Lostness is ended when we find a known path and choose to follow it. To the 36 new members of this community, beginning a year of service, you will in a moment say that you choose to follow Christ, and that you choose to love one another. Moses chose to obey God, albeit after much arguing. In grace God allowed Moses and thus Israel to discover Him, as they were discovered by grace, by the love of God. So God allows you to discover Him, by grace, and so God offers that same grace of finding community, a known way and a true path, to every human being who says yes.

Yet grace in the Exodus story is present in the physical and the real. A wilderness, amongst sheep (noisy, smelly and tending to wander) in a bush. Grace is not hidden in holy places, but flaunts itself for us in the open air. In community you will find grace in the ordinary, coming up by surprise when you wonder why you are here. Yet the grace of Jesus will find you, and you will discover and be discovered, in the most mundane moments. Say yes with great expectation of burning grace in our midst here and in all Christian community where the Holy Spirit is at work.

The reading from John includes my favourite verse, inscribed in a Bible I was given on the day after I gave my life to Christ: "You did not choose me, but I chose you." Yet, to each of our 36 new members, both from the UK and around the world, you come here because you applied and were invited. Then there is a surprise that we are each the called and chosen, when we thought we chose, and will choose. Jesus is saying, recognise the authority of God's choice, and co-operate with it, so that there is fruit.

We commit to receive each other as a gift. That is a challenge for you, and for all at Lambeth Palace for whom this is a radical change, including me, especially me. You are God's gifts to me, and astonishing as it may seem, I to you [laughter], and all to each other. If we receive those gifts, we will bear fruit, now and in the future for decades even into eternity.

That fruit is seen in change, in being transformed. Paul in our reading from Romans is writing to a church divided, and struggling with age old patterns of behaviour, from seeking power by one group or another, to ancient contempts and even hatreds.

There will be moments of that here, there may already be, as from time to time in every Christian community. The thought will cross your mind "it's because he is from such and such a country", or because of her background, or denomination, or gender.

Do not be conformed to the patterns we inherit. This community will be prophetic when it allows God to do the transforming, and none of us allows our inherited ways to conform us to certain forms of behaviour. Communities of grace see transformation from what is towards what should be. Grace is something that, being shared, transforms us.

Religious communities are full of grace when they are full of Christ. Yet his presence is realised in the ordinary, and we see often only in retrospect the nail scarred hand that looked at the time like those of our roommate, we realise that our hearts burned within us as he broke bread with us, we notice the burning bush when it is but a memory of a strange moment in a desert week. Community allows Christ to be present graciously in the ordinary, and in doing so all is changed and all is lit with hope and fruit and purpose. We walk amongst orchards of fruit set by others in grace. We consume, and we are changed unaware.

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