

E-READ

The General Conference of the New Church **Articles and Letters**

Contributions

If you would like to contribute a letter or article to future issues of e-Read, please send it via email to :

gemma.mclean@gcnc.org.uk

Please note that publication is at the discretion of our Spiritual Leadership.

Donations

E-News and E-Read are provided completely free of charge. If you would like to make a donation to help the General Conference of the New Church maintain these services, please visit:

<http://gcnc.org.uk/donations>

Mercy and Grace *by Revd Clifford Curry*

“If you make the Most High your dwelling even the Lord who is my refuge then no harm will befall you no disaster will come near your tent. For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways; they will lift you up in their hands so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.”
Ps 91v9ff.

You will all have sung “Amazing Grace” now I don’t regard you ‘wretches’, but there is something immediately attractive in the 1st line or title “Amazing Grace”. The hymn is unusual because it is not a prayer, nor praising God’s love or goodness, nor telling a bible story or a psalm..... It is a personal testimony from late 1700s of John Newton who was

a mariner, a reckless, ruffian and a rebel, a captain in the slave trade, who, nearly losing his life in a storm, gave that life to God and later became a loved and respected minister in London. Another of his hymns has this same flavour “How sweet the name of Jesus sounds in a believers ear”.

I’ve only sung Amazing Grace once in the New Church at a wedding I conducted in Blackpool. The groom was an ex-convict converted to faith in prison, and the first thing that connected him with Jesus was this hymn – amazing! We sang it with him and for him.

Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound,
That saved a wretch like me.
I once was lost but now am found,
Was blind, but now I see.

T'was Grace that taught my heart to fear.
 And Grace, my fears relieved.
 How precious did that Grace appear
 The hour I first believed.

Through many dangers, toils and snares
 I have already come;
 'Tis Grace that brought me safe thus far
 and Grace will lead me home.

Even more amazing is that grace isn't mentioned in either Matthew or Mark's gospels despite being a word commonly used by the early Christians and appearing frequently in Paul's letters

It is, however, used in John – he writes:

“We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.” He then goes to explain that John the Baptist spoke of this grace as that which surpassed his baptism. “John testifies concerning him. He cries out saying ‘this is he of whom I said he who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me’. From the fullness of his grace we have all received one blessing after another. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.” John.1v14-17

“Grace” in the sense John uses it appears just once in Luke, in the reading from Luke 4 v 14-24. Jesus speaks gracious words or literally “Words of grace”. “Grace” seems to mark a change in the concept of God, something that Swedenborg sees as very important. Speaking about grace he writes as follows:

AE 22. Those who receive Divine truth more than Divine good, are in the spiritual kingdom of the Lord, and are therefore called spiritual; but those who receive Divine good more than Divine truth, are in the celestial kingdom of the Lord, and are therefore called celestial..... To those who are in the spiritual kingdom it is granted by the Lord to be in the affection of truth for the sake of truth, and this Divine gift is what is called grace; nor is there any other Divine grace given with man, spirit, or angel, than that of being affected with truth because it is truth, since in that affection they have heaven and all its blessedness. It is the same thing whether you say the affection of truth or the delight of truth; for there is no affection without delight. This is what is specifically meant by grace in the Word; as in John:

“And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, and we beheld his glory, as the glory of the only-begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth; of his fulness have all we received, and grace for grace. For the law was given by Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ” (i. 14, 16, 17).

As grace is the affection and delight of truth, mention is made of both grace and truth. In Luke, after the Lord had explained in the synagogue the prophetic declaration of Isaiah concerning Himself, thus concerning Divine truth, it is said: “And all wondered at the words of grace which proceeded out of his mouth” (iv. 22).

We find John making a clear distinction between the law and grace

“For the law was given through Moses

Grace and truth came through Jesus Christ” Jn1v17

The Greek word for grace is 'Charis' and it is a word like Agape, the New testament word for unconditional or God inspired love. Charis, like agape, was claimed by the early Christians as a word to express the changed concept of the Divine that they had encountered in Jesus Christ. The earlier gospels of Mark and Matthew do not mention grace. Luke, a little later, has just one reference mentioned earlier whilst John, the last written of the gospels, uses 'grace' in what had by then become a well established word given its extensive use in Paul's letters.

In the Old Testament we have the Lord God described as to his loving kindness and mercy, but here it seems the Lord is only at his most benevolent when mankind toes the line. It is a two way relationship with obligations on both sides or to use the biblical word a covenant. If we keep our side of the bargain the Lord will keep his. There is always the sense of IF – if we behave, if we keep to the rules, if we are faithful to God in worship. This concept of God is still very much around, a Divine who can be angered, who punishes as well as giving rewards.

This kind of idea is more a reflection of who we are and how we react to situations. It is a projection of our attitudes and feelings onto the Lord. One of the most persistent is a feeling that we have to be loveable and worthwhile to be loved, to be of use and value in order for the Lord to value us.

Grace is a word that endeavours to encapsulate the huge shift in the concept of God that the early Christians experienced. They discovered something utterly amazing, barely believable, in the Divine character and they called it 'Grace'.

'Charis' originally meant that which gives joy and delight, hence 'charm'. It has a sense of courteous kindly and gracious and so expresses goodwill and willing favour. This meaning became enlarged to express undeserved blessing for the undeserving, love offered to the unloveable, a tireless resolve to rescue the rebellious.

'Grace' for these people went far beyond mercy and any kind of loving kindness they understood. 'Grace' would go to any lengths even when rejected it did not change its essential character.

Paul, who had persecuted Christians, and John Newton the slave trader stand equally amazed – "when we were yet sinners Christ died for us!". The Lord our God cannot be changed, does not change, is the very rock and foundation of all that has ever been and will be, and God is LOVE! For the early church they wanted a new word to express their experience of the love that reached out to them in the life and death of Jesus and that word was 'Grace'.

Luke who tells us of the Lord's 'Words of grace' at the opening of his ministry also tells of a Tax collector whose plea for forgiveness reached the Lord before the prayer of the self-righteous Pharisee – of Zaccaeus the dishonest taxman who gave it all away for joy of meeting Jesus – of the sinful woman who anointed the Lord's feet in Simon the Pharisee's house – of the crucified criminal who was told "today you will be with me in Paradise". Only he records the parables of the lost coin, the lost sheep, the Prodigal Son.

Grace - Joy-creating and peacemaking, love, generosity, compassion, caring and forgiveness that is just amazing. Amazing Grace, beyond any love that had been known. "Grace and truth came through Jesus Christ".

The truth about the Lord's attitude towards us – the constancy and consistency of His love – His enduring endeavours to lead us to find lasting peace and happiness is at the heart of the gospel message. To know God's grace is when this truth resonates in our heart as a source of reassurance joy and delight.....then we can sing with Handel's Messiah "I know that my redeemer liveth" and by the Lord's grace our heart is uplifted and our view of life transformed.



*Amazing
Grace*