

## SERMON FOR THE SUNDAY OF TRINITY

(Cape Town - 18 May 2008)

**Text:** “May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.” (2 Cor.2:13)

As I use these words to address you every Sunday just before I read the sermon text, it may just be that you fail to register them. It is, therefore, a good opportunity we have today to spend some time today to reflect on what is generally known as the “Greeting of Peace”.

This sermon text forms part of our *Trinity* celebrations - so let me first say something about Trinity. The festival of Trinity is unique amongst the festivals of the church. It is in fact the only festival that is based on a *doctrine*, rather than a specific historical event. This means, amongst other, that the word “trinity” or “triune God” does not feature in the Bible at all. Instead it is the result of an effort on the part of the church to capture what is implied in various Bible verses concerning God.

But the Trinity remains a difficult concept, extremely hard to explain. And try as we may, we never quite capture everything that needs to be said, as God is always greater than our words.

One day a boy comes home from Sunday school and says to us mom: “I learned today that God is everywhere”. “That is true”, his mother responded. “Is he in the oven when it is really hot?”, the boy asked. “Yes”, she replied. “How about the cupboard?” “Yes”, said the mother. “And the fridge where it is cold?” “Of course”, she said. And the boy lifted the lid of the sugar bowl and said: “Is he in here as well?” “Well I suppose so,” the mother said. And the boy slammed the bowl shut and announced triumphantly: “Got him”.

The mother had a bit of explaining to do. But the story reveals a truth about the way many people view God. They think too small of him. God is far greater than we can ever imagine. He created us. We didn’t create him. And when we speak about him, or formulate a doctrine about him, we inevitably say to little and *reduce* him to our level of understanding.

God is *so* great!. And the early Christian soon realised that they could not speak about God without speaking of the *three* ways in which he revealed himself. This does not mean, there are three Gods. There is one God. But this one God has shown himself to us as a Father, a Son, and a Holy Spirit.

This is also seen in our sermon text. Paul concludes this letter to the Corinthians with the “Greeting of Peace”. But as he unfolds this greeting he can only do so in the three ways in which he himself experienced God in his own life.

Let us have a look at his greeting in greater detail. There are three keywords that are associated with the three persons of God.

### I

The first word is “grace”: “*May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.. be with you all.*”.

“Grace” - a central word in our Lutheran Theology. *Sola gratia!* We are saved “by grace alone”, the Reformers said. But grace is a difficult concept to grasp. In fact you can explain it impeccably well, and it may still elude you. Grace is not something you observe like an “object”. In fact, it is first and foremost an experience you make.

So let me tell you of such an experience. It is a biblical story, which I will dramatise a bit. There was a Judean Zealot who was excessively patriotic of his own country. He had only one goal in life and that was to get the oppressive, self-enriching Romans out of his country. Maybe there was a bit xenophobia, as we saw in many township of South Africa this last week. He didn’t want these foreigners in his country.

I am not sure that this man ever met Jesus. But the chances were good that he will at least have heard about this wandering preacher from Galilee who sided with the poor and taught love and forgiveness. But it was a message that made no impression on him. He was radical.

But one day the events in his life took a wrong turn. He was captured by the Roman and tried for treason. The judge, sick and tired of these Zealots, had no mercy. He sentenced the man to death on the cross.

When they pulled up his cross on a hill just outside Jerusalem, he noticed that he wasn’t alone. Apart from a compatriot, there was another man being crucified. It was Jesus. And all the hatred of the people under the cross was focussed on this man. They mocked and ridiculed him. Apart from crying out in pain, he didn’t say much. When suddenly his Zealot compatriot started mocking Jesus as well, he lost a bit. He shouted: “What are doing? Unlike us, this man has done nothing wrong. Why are you ridiculing him?”

And at that moment - that is the way I imagine it at least - his whole life past by before his eyes like a film strip. He saw his hatred. He saw how he had excluded God from his life and how he had spend all of his energy on selfish and self-honouring purposes.

As he looked at Jesus on the cross, his eyes suddenly swelled up with tears. He was overcome with sorrow. He would have loved to have another chance of life. But he was dying on the cross. He wanted to shout out to Jesus and say: “Can you forgive me?” But those words just didn’t come over his lips. So he said: “***Jesus, will you remember me when you enter your kingdom.***” And Jesus looked at him and said: “***I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise***” (Lk.23:43).

That is grace! It is not something I work for. It is not something I understand. It is something I experience in my relationship with God. I know, I am doomed. And he says: “No, you are saved”. “***May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ... be with you.***”

## II

The second keyword in the Greeting of Peace is “love.” “***May the love of God... be with you all.***”

Well, if we battle to understand “grace”, “love” is just as difficult. This is not the kind of love you get between two people of equal standing, where one good deed is reciprocated with another good

deed: I love you, and you love me.

“That is easy”, Jesus once said to a huge crowd that was listening to him (cf Mt.5:43ff). “If you love those, who love you, what is so special? Even the pagans do it”, Jesus said.

God’s love is totally different. God’s love is an unconditional and a selfless love. He expects nothing in return. He loves because he *is* love. And it is this love that pushed him over the cliff.

When people didn’t respond to his love communicated by Moses and the prophets, God decided to act himself. In his Son he dropped into the world. The mighty God took the nature of a servant - a human slave. He became one of us. And if that wasn’t enough, he gave his own life to reconcile us with himself.

That already in itself is significant. John writes: **“Greater love has no one that his, that he lay down his life for his friends”** (15:13). But as Paul noted, not even that captures the magnitude of God’s love. Paul therefore adds in his letter to the Romans: **“God demonstrates his love in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us”** (5:8).

Long before I am converted, there is this love that reaches out to me. People may be disinterested or apatetic towards God. People may walk away from God and say: “I don’t need you.” But God says: “I want you. You are so important to me that I am prepared to give my Son.” That is divine love.

### III

The third keyword of this Greeting of Peace is “fellowship”. **“And may the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.”**

Fellowship is not only important, but essential for human life. We were created to have fellowship. Nothing is as bad as being alone, having no friends, having no one to confide in, or no one to share your joy with. You can have all the riches of this world, but if you have no fellowship, you are poor.

For me family fellowship is important. It is so great to know I have a “wife” who likes me. I do stupid things, she likes me. I sin, she forgives me. It is also a highlight when my greater family visit us here in Cape Town. It is relaxing. There is no pressure to cook fancy meals to keep my brother or my sisters happy. We are a family. There is fellowship.

God seeks this fellowship with you and me. When Jesus’ disciples were all anxious because he would leave them, he said to them: “No ways. I am sending you my Spirit. And when that happens, I will be with you all the time. If you want to chat, you can call me. If you want to cry, I will be there to comfort you. If you do stupid things that harm you, I will be there to point it out. I am always going to be with you.” This is what God does through his Spirit.

I need to conclude: This is not all we can say about God. We are scratching the surface. He is bigger than we think. His grace is more wonderful than we can imagine. His love is far greater than we ever thought. His fellowship is far more special than anything we have ever experienced before.

And let me say something to those of you who battle to believe in God. Desmond Tutu in his book *Hope and Suffering* recalls a story of a simple Russian priest who was confronted by a top Russian scientist. And the scientist bombarded him with devastating arguments on why God does not exist, and boldly: "I don't believe in God." And this simple priest retorted: "Oh, it doesn't matter - God believes in you."

We will never puzzle God out complete. Even a doctrine of the Trinity does not capture what needs to be said about him. But we do sense, there is a gracious, a loving, and a fellowship seeking God who believes in us. And that is enough. Amen.

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