

A QUESTION OF ACCESS

Exodus 19. 2-8a

Romans 5. 1-8

Matthew 9. 35-38, 10. 1-10

I speak to you in the name of † the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

‘Access’ has become a key phrase in our technological age.

Whenever I want to enter the sacristy at St Stephen’s via the outside door, as I did earlier this morning, I am required to type in a code that will give me *access* to that room. Often, when we are working with computers, we will hear someone speak of access, but he or she will turn the noun into a verb and say, ‘I need to *access* that file’. And many of us are required to use different passwords, or codes, to *access* our e-mail accounts, or to withdraw money from the bank, or to make debit card purchases in shops. I now have to remember so many passwords that I have prepared a carefully coded list that I keep both on my mobile phone and at home. I just hope that I don’t lose them.

In our appointed epistle reading for today, St Paul wrote for a world in which people were desperately trying to find the passwords that would give them *access* to God. Some thought that careful obedience to the law of Moses was the key. Others thought that civic virtues were the way to get access. Still others tried to placate God by the breadth of their philosophical knowledge.

Paul’s astonishing claim in this text is that there is only one password that we need to remember to have access to God, and that is Jesus Christ. In and through our Lord, everyone has access to God the Father; and they have access to peace and his grace. As soon as we take this on board, suddenly the entire picture is reversed. No

longer do we have to strive to reach or have access to God; rather, we realise that it is God who is striving to reach *us*, and to show us his grace. No longer do we have to feel that *we* must use Christ as a means to attain God's mercy; rather, it is God who sends Christ *to us*, to enact the mercy that God had intended for us from the beginning of time.

According to Paul, grace is not just a gift of God in Jesus Christ that is extended to everyone, including both Jews and Gentiles. As well as being a gift, grace is also intended to be our *dwelling place*: in the words of our text, 'this grace *in which we stand*'. God's grace to us surrounds us and upholds us and defines who we are. Our lives are shaped by the gift of grace that we can never achieve, but only receive.

I am reminded of someone in my former parish whom I will call Rachel, and whom I had the privilege to counsel whilst I was there. Rachel was like many of us. She had come to faith as an adolescent and was sincerely intentional in her desire to live out her faith. But the path she had travelled as an adult was not a smooth one. As Rachel looked back on her life, all she saw was a series of mishaps, including a failed marriage, failed relationships with subsequent partners, a failure to keep a job and earn a steady income, and a failure to have a family of her own. To make matters worse, she felt that she had miserably failed her parents, who although they were elderly, never missed an opportunity to tell her that she and her life were a disappointment to them. 'Failure' was the recurring word that Rachel used to describe her life and her spiritual condition.

Rachel was someone who found it difficult to forgive herself for her failures, and she certainly didn't expect God to forgive her for them. Whenever I spoke to her about God's forgiveness, she seemed temporarily reassured; but in the next moment would need further reassuring. Rachel was someone – and she is not only one – who needed desperately to be shown that God's grace is not only a gift. It is a dwelling place. It

is a space that is given to us, in which we are called to live. It is when we think of grace in these terms that a verse from the Psalms takes on particular meaning: '(The Lord) brought me out into a spacious place; he rescued me because he delighted in me' (18. 19).

In his epistle to the church in Rome, Paul tells us what life looks like when it is grounded in grace. It is not only marked by peace; it is also marked by suffering (as Rachel knew only too well). But those of us who suffer can take heart. For our lives, when they are marked by suffering, are Christ-shaped. In our suffering, we simply follow our Lord, who as it is written had to suffer many things before he entered into glory.

Yet suffering, as difficult as it is, bears its own fruits; or perhaps we could say that God's *grace bears fruit* through the suffering we endure. Those who are grounded in the grace of God are given a whole litany of gifts that contribute to their moral and spiritual development. For those who suffer are given endurance; and from that endurance comes character, and that character produces hope.

Paul then invites us to note what the source and the instrument of this hope is.

It is ultimately love that produces hope. We all know that that is true in existential terms. The child who lives in hope is a child who has been surrounded by love. The love to which Paul points (as he has already made clear) is not simply human love. It is God's love shown in Jesus Christ. Our Lord died, not for the righteous and not for the good, but for the ungodly. That is good news indeed; because most of us know perfectly well that the category of the ungodly includes us.

Now things are even clearer than when we began. What counts is not so much our access to God, as God's access to us. It is not that we reach longingly toward heaven,

but that heaven reaches out longingly to us. It is not that we are good enough or wise enough or obedient enough to gain God; it is that God has gained us for himself.

I read an article recently in which a former politician told of how he first began to understand the Christian story. He was serving on the front in the Second World War. He and a group of his fellow soldiers were advancing when the enemy lobbed a grenade into their midst. Instantly one of politician's fellow soldiers fell on the grenade, absorbed the explosion and gave up his life for his friends.

For those of us who are interested in theology, we might be interested in studying different approaches to the doctrine of the atonement, which is a word that describes what Jesus did to pay for humankind's sins against God. Others of us might find those doctrines to be complicated or unsatisfactory. Thankfully, in his epistle to the church in Rome, St Paul blesses us by writing in very simple language. As he hammers his points about Christ and what Christ does, Paul shifts from verb to verb: Christ saves; Christ justifies; Christ reconciles. And Paul's description of what Christ does shifts from metaphor to metaphor: an obedient second Adam undoes the disobedience of the first. A sinless man is made to be sin. A godly Messiah dies for ungodly people.

The claim about which Paul writes outreaches all of our human metaphors, and the name that he proclaims embraces all of our weaknesses: Jesus Christ is the access to God's grace; and it is in that grace that we stand.

Amen.