

HAMILTON REFORMATION SERVICE

2009

EPHESIANS 2:8-10

“For it is by grace you have been saved through faith – and this is not from yourselves, it is a gift of God – not by works so that no one can boast. For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.”
Ephesians 2:8-10

Dr Andrew Pfeiffer is a lecturer at ALC, Luther Seminary. Prior to studying for the ministry (some 30 years ago now) he spent several months in Libya. His father was working there for the government as an agricultural adviser.

After Andrew had been there for some time, the Libyans invited him as their special guest to be a Libyan for a day. This was a real honour. A Libyan for a day! The freedom of the city! He had the freedom of the place. He was accepted by them as one of them.

What made him a Libyan? What he wore? What he ate? What he did? No, it was their invitation, their word.

Had some Libyan returned from an overseas trip during the day and said, “Why are you here? What right have you got to be a Libyan?” Andrew would not be able to refer to his clothes. He would not be able to claim he was eating their food. He would not be able to direct their attention to his actions and claim he was a Libyan because he was acting and living as one. The only thing he could refer to was their invitation, their word.

He was a Libyan, not because of anything he was or did. He was a Libyan for the day because of them – their invitation, their word, their promise. You could say he was a Libyan by grace.

Lutherans are very conscious of the grace of God.

Grace is at the heart of everything for us. It’s the reason we’re observing this Reformation Festival today. Grace is the heart and core of our theology and preaching. We are saved by grace. We stress that. We teach it. We preach it. We proclaim it. We are saved by grace.

It might be at the heart of our teaching, but it’s not so easy to grasp and understand.

I know of a pastor who asks prospective members of the church in the Adult Enquirer’s Class a question which is answered more often incorrectly than correctly. He offers people a true/false statement which simply says, **When God blesses us we may conclude that we are worthy of his blessings.** Almost everyone answers that question, True.

St Paul answered it with a thundering false. False! It is false. Martin Luther answered it that way. Our forebears answered it that way. And we today answer it that way. It is false.

If Martin Luther and our Lutheran Confessions ever said anything, echoing and re-echoing St Paul in the Bible, it was just this. People are saved by GRACE through faith in Jesus Christ and in no other way.

Unfortunately human nature human nature has a tendency of getting in the way of grace.

Although most people say they believe there is a God, many of them haven't the foggiest what the grace of God means. And that's precisely because human nature does get in the way. Our very nature – yours and mine – urges us to feel that we are really very deserving, if only God knew about it.

There's the temptation in our congregation and church to think that we are really very deserving. We are proud of our heritage. We are proud of our congregation. We are proud of our background and struggles. We read the history of the Lutheran Reformers and we read the history of our own growth and development as a church in Australia and a lump comes to our throat and tears to our eyes and a righteous swelling to the heart.

I don't in any way want to belittle any of this or a rightful attitude of thankfulness and gratitude for our background, for what we are and what we have.

But I must say and I have to say that when it comes to salvation God knocks the stuffing out of human pride and deserving. He did with Paul. Paul thought he was the most deserving of all – a Pharisee, of the tribe of Benjamin, of the people of Israel. A Hebrew of the Hebrews! Full of zeal! And as for legalistic righteousness, he was faultless.

God knocked the stuffing out of Paul and his pride, just as he does out of us. And this is what he says, **FOR IT IS BY GRACE YOU HAVE BEEN SAVED THROUGH FAITH AND THIS NOT FROM YOURSELVES, IT IS THE GIFT OF GOD-NOT BY WORKS SO THAT NO ONE CAN BOAST.**

God wants to save people. He will go to almost any lengths to save people. In fact, he did go to almost any lengths to save people. He sent his son into the world to suffer with people and to die for people. That Son of God died to put us right with God. He died to bring us back into right relationship with him. In typical Christian jargon, he died to save us.

When it comes to salvation, your performance doesn't count a cracker – not a brass razzo. Your excellent track record as a Christian doesn't count. Your wonderful history and background as a congregation doesn't count. Your Lutheran name and Lutheran heritage and long-standing as a Lutheran doesn't count. The excellence of your congregation and church doesn't count, as important as all those things might be.

Salvation is not by works lest anyone should boast or go about bragging about it.

All the efforts in the world at living as a Libyan didn't make Andrew Pfeiffer a Libyan. He couldn't brag about his own achievements. He could only point to their goodness and to their gracious invitation. It was all their doing.

Now our church has always been strong on this. We've hammered it out. We've stressed it. We've promoted it. And rightly so. It's at the heart of Scripture. It was at the heart of the Lutheran Reformation. It's at the heart of the Lutheran Confessions. **By grace, not works.** That's the slogan we've stressed so often. By grace, not works. We've shouted that slogan loud and clear – by grace, not works.

But my theme for today from this text is **BY GRACE FOR WORKS.** That's not intended to deny that we are saved by grace and by grace alone and not by works. It's not intended to say that works play any part whatsoever in our salvation. But it is intended to say what is stated quite clearly here in our text, and it is intended to say that an automatic and natural result of being saved is to do good works.

Luther used to say, **A STONE IN THE SUN DOESN'T HAVE TO BE COMMANDED TO BE WARM.** It just is. It's a natural result of it being in the light of the sun.

When Professor Thielicke, famous German theologian, was here years ago he told the story of a colleague of his (a University lecturer) by the name of George who was a rather weak person. His wife would try to build him up and encourage him. Every morning as George went off to the University, his wife would stand in the doorway and say after him as he went down the garden path, 'Be profound today, George, be profound'. But, of course, as Thielicke said in his own inimitable English, 'You cannot command profundity'.

Well, you can't command good works either. I mean, you can, but it won't work. The government could pass legislation tomorrow commanding everyone to love perfectly from now on. But it wouldn't make any difference whatsoever.

You can't command a fruit tree to produce fruit. It just does. It does it naturally.

So the Christian naturally produces good works.

We're not saved by good works. We're saved by grace. But for what purpose? By grace, for works. **FOR WE ARE GOD'S WORKMANSHIP, CREATED IN CHRIST JESUS TO DO GOOD WORKS, WHICH GOD PREPARED IN ADVANCE FOR US TO DO.**

The word actually used by Paul for **workmanship** is **poem**. It's not produced on a lathe in a factory somewhere. It's not the kind of workmanship that comes off an assembly line. A poem is an artistic creation. In the sense that a poet writes a poem or a musician composes a song, so God has created us as his workmanship, his workmanship to produce good works.

A poem can't claim any credit for being a poem. A song can't claim any credit for being a song. The credit goes to the poet and songwriter.

A Christian can't claim any credit for being a Christian. A church can't claim any credit for being a church. All credit goes to the Creator, the one who created us as his workmanship.

Like tentacles reaching out into the community the grace of God goes through the works of the people of God.

- It might be love for fellow members of the congregation
- It might be family forgiveness and solidarity
- It might be lending a helping hand to a neighbour
- No matter what, it's the life of praise and thanksgiving in response to God's grace.

Martin Luther gets a lot of credit for reinstating faith at the heart of life. It's seldom recognized that Luther was at his ever-living best when he emphasized works – works growing out of faith becoming a new and loving poem for God.

I believe one of the questions we have to ask ourselves is the question, have we forgotten works?

We've been strong on saved by grace and not by works. And thank God for that. But has that emphasis tended to make us think that works don't need emphasising. – or even doing?

Bonhoeffer said that Lutherans and the Lutheran Church are in danger of cheap grace. That's always the danger that confronts us.

If good works aren't there, is it because we've taken God's grace and love for granted? If good works aren't there in abundance, is it because we haven't understood or clearly grasped what the grace of God is all about?

How could we ever fail to be moved by God's grace? This is the deepest, grandest, broadest theme ever voiced by men or angels

- Ask the prophets of old what they longed to peer into most and they will tell you it's the story of God's grace.
- Ask the apostles and evangelists what motivated them and drove them into a heathen and hostile world to tell the good as they did, and they will tell you a story of God's grace.
- Ask the martyrs of the church why they gave their lives into death and you'll hear a story of the grace and mercy of God in Jesus Christ.
- Ask the pain-wracked believers of today what sustains them and keeps them going, and they will talk of the grace of God.

My vision for our church is a vision of a people who are on fire because they've been touched by the grace of God, undeserved as they are, and who see themselves now as God's special creation, his workmanship, his poem.

We should always have two things:

1. A deep gratitude and thankfulness to God for his marvellous grace
2. And flowing out of that grace, a desire to serve God with a life of good works.

The impact of your regular Sunday worship, because of the message proclaimed and the God worshipped, goes far beyond your local church. It goes out into the community and affects the lives of all with whom the worshippers here come in contact. That is a marvellous and unique impact and witness, a continuing Reformation and a continuation of the Reformation begun by Martin Luther.

Today, as always, I urge you to thank God for his marvellous grace together with all the other blessings of the Lutheran Reformation, and to continue to confess that we are saved by grace and not by works. But I also urge you to add, in your confession and in your lives, **BY GRACE FOR WORKS.**

Amen.