

Easter 7C 29 May 2022
Revelation 22:12-14, 16-17, 20-21
St Peter's Lutheran Church Elizabeth
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Grace to you and peace from Jesus Christ, who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.

See, I am coming soon; my reward is with me, to repay according to everyone's work. Let's pray:

See, I am coming soon; my reward is with me, to repay according to everyone's work. Two questions: Is there anything that strikes you about this statement? Where do you place the emphasis? I ask, because it can affect us more than we're aware.

For example, I can say, "I have both good news and bad news for you. The good news is – Jesus is coming soon – Yay! The bad news is – Jesus is coming soon – Quick, look busy!" Same statement; two very different reactions. The first sees God as love and forgiveness; the other sees God as a vengeful judge, itching to execute judgement.

Your view depends on what you process. We all hear: "See, I am coming soon; my reward is with me, to repay according to everyone's work." Some process, "my reward is with me", while others will dwell on, "repay according to everyone's work."

The latter sees God holding scales of justice, weighing and measuring everyone according to their deeds, satisfied with some and finding others wanting. Even though we've had centuries of teaching and preaching about God's grace and forgiveness, there's an innate fear or doubt that drives many people to hedge their bets by feeding and clothing the poor, visiting the sick, funding missionaries, giving to the needy – busy, busy, busy . . . just in case.

Those who mock Christians exploit this. When I worked in construction and mining, blokes would taunt me with, "Quick, look busy, Jesus is coming", and call me "God-botherer" or "devil-dodger". They believe that Christians only do good to avoid being punished, or pester God so that he'll notice them and judge them favourably for their effort.

So, does God weigh and measure us on a cosmological set of scales? Does God write risk/reward contracts where everyone is compensated according to services rendered? Do the scriptures reveal a divine magistrate who scares people out of hell rather than a doting Father whose love and forgiveness draws people to him?

From a flawed human perspective and with Satan's goading, many people characterise God as a grumpy old judge who begrudgingly saves "good" people and is out to get "bad" people. They believe that hard work and good deeds are what merit salvation. This is a view shaped by the fear of God's Law without knowing his saving Gospel in Jesus Christ.

Yet, those who trust and cling to their Saviour and his promises, latch on to the hope in Jesus' remark, "my reward is with me."

When Christ comes to judge the world, he'll bring with him the reward each person is due. Those who don't believe in and worship Jesus due to his holy name will receive the appropriate wage or reward. St Paul tells us, 'the wages of sin is death' (Romans 6:23a). But the faithful won't be judged as Jesus says earlier in [Revelation 20:11-15]. The only "work" of the saints is to wear the robes of righteousness which Jesus has given them (Revelation 3:5; 7:9,13,14; 22:14), and their reward - 'the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord' (Romans 6:23b).

Now, I understand why people might throw up challenges like:

- Who mixed with all the wrong people in his ministry, but expects his followers to live chastely? Jesus.
- Who called a genocidal fanatic, changed his name to Paul, and sent him out to talk about love? Jesus.
- Who promised to return soon and has left his followers hanging for two thousand years? Jesus.

Human reason struggles to see a fair and just God. But here's the clincher:

- Who recklessly cast aside fairness and justice and gave up his own sinless life, to save a misery-guts like me? That same, wonderful, Jesus.

Any measure of God's justice and fairness is defined by grace. It's not logical or rational. It's mysterious. God refuses to be put in a box that's confined to our limited understanding. God is wild, untamed, uninhibited, and exciting.

He's always breaking our rules; exercising his grace willy-nilly, where and as he wishes; throwing it around like confetti. The point is that God can only be understood through unmerited, freely and lovingly dispensed grace - not a human sense of justice.

God's grace is beyond definition. That's why we must restrain from making judgements about others because God clearly demonstrates that grace belongs entirely in the sphere of his Being, not our understanding. Yet, although God's grace is mysterious, he provides means by which we can access it.

(At the font) We see God's grace at work when he baptises in his name: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Jesus removes our old, sin-stained clothes, wraps his love and forgiveness around us, and stakes his claim on our lives.

With baptism comes privilege and promise – 'Blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they will have the right to the tree of life and may enter the city by the gates' [22:14], or in other words, "Blessed are those who are baptised and believe in Jesus' love and forgiveness, for they will enter into heaven." Jesus' love on the cross blew the gates of heaven off their hinges that those who are baptised and believe may freely and easily enter.

(At the Communion table) We also see God's grace at work with Jesus' invitation: "Come!" "And let everyone who is thirsty come. Let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift" [22:17]. Anyone! Holy Communion illuminates the mystery and universal reach of God's grace. In this most precious gift, anyone who thirsts for Jesus is invited to eat and drink his love and forgiveness so that they may live. His life blood is our life blood.

We eat and drink, remembering Jesus' sacrifice. We eat and drink receiving him now, and we eat and drink looking forward to the feast in heaven to come; life with him. Jesus, the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end, sustains our lives with his body and blood, his love and forgiveness. He is God's grace.

Brothers and Sisters, like you, I can't wait to see heaven. But we still have lives to live and love to share here. Some days are filled with joy and some days grind us down. But day by day God's grace urges us on and his love encourages us to keep straining for the prize as Paul tells us.

That's the genius of God's grace. He meets us, encourages us, forgives us, and imparts his love to us through his Word and Sacraments which carry his promise and his Spirit. Through them, Jesus ministers to us, showing us how to treat each other, how to love others as he loves us. He shows us how to endure and encourage each other on life's pilgrimage to our heavenly home. And, like all who find water in the desert, God wants us to joyfully show others where to drink.

Friends, we're not waiting to be judged according to our work. Our sinful nature has been covered by robes washed clean by Jesus' blood. We've been declared guilt-free according to God's gracious work in our Lord Jesus. Nor are we waiting for Jesus to come. He's already here. We're not waiting to be saved. Jesus has saved us.

Jesus has given his life so that we may live freely and our faith is sustained by his love and forgiveness. Through his Word and Sacraments and the love that we share daily as we help each other along, God reveals his grace to us.

Jesus says: "My reward is with me." His promise reminds us that he is always with us, giving us strength and confidence for living now, and hope for an eternal dwelling place for us in God's holy city – Heaven - the place without sickness or sorrow, pain or suffering, mourning or death, flowing with the water of life.

Saints, I'd like to conclude with a blessing. May the grace of Jesus our Lord, for mind and heart and life, rest upon you, and lead you into a deeper knowledge of him who is our life. May his grace rest in forgiveness and love upon you. May Jesus open your eyes to see the shining towers of the Heavenly Jerusalem; open your ears to hear the heavenly music to which it is being built; bind you by his love to that sweet service and citizenship which is perfect freedom, and carry you to that spiritual city which radiates divine enchantment (adapted from Bishop Carpenter's Commentary on Revelation, 1897). Amen.

And the boundless grace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus until he and the Spirit say, "Come into the holy city and share in the tree of life forever." Amen.