

‘A spring of water welling up to eternal life’

Jn 4:14

Grace has often been spoken about from this pulpit, but last week someone asked, ‘What is grace?’ And that, of course, is very good question.

First, just to add a dash of confusion, grace isn’t actually a *thing* at all. It doesn’t have shape or colour, you cannot see or touch or taste it. Rather, grace is a quality: it makes a difference to our spiritual lives and to the state of our souls depending on whether this quality is present or absent. Grace is the presence of God.

In the old-fashioned theology textbooks there were lots of categories of grace. Each category described the effects of grace rather than grace itself. In reality there are just two types of grace: actual grace and sanctifying grace.

The first type is called actual grace because it is the presence of God’s actions on our souls. God is continuously acting upon our souls, steering them, guiding them, drawing them closer to Himself. Somebody once described actual grace as God shoving you between the shoulder blades, pushing you forward in the right direction. It’s not a bad image. In this way we might think of God’s grace as always bubbling away behind the scenes. There is never a moment – not even a millisecond – when God is not at work in our lives, blessing us and influencing us for the good. Whether we take any notice of His actions, and whether we allow His actions to lead us on, is a different matter. But at least if we are aware of the fact that He is always there, acting upon us, then we might be in a better position to start looking for His presence even in our darkest hours.

The second type is called sanctifying grace because it sanctifies us, it makes us holy, it makes us like to God. Sanctifying grace is the indwelling of God in our souls: when

we are in what we call a state of grace it means God has taken up residence in our souls. We receive sanctifying grace through the Sacraments, first, of course, at our Baptism. Sanctifying grace changes the quality of our souls for the better. It transforms our souls to be more like to God, chiefly because it means that God's life – divine life – is present in our souls. It is as if God has breathed His own life, His Spirit, into our souls, just as He breathed life into Adam at the moment of Adam's creation in the Book of Genesis.

St Thomas Aquinas tells us that when we are in a state of grace, we already have one foot in heaven, because being in heaven means being in the presence of God and being at one with God.

Both of these types of grace – actual grace and sanctifying grace – are pure and undeserved gifts from God. We cannot earn them; we do not have a right to them. Rather, out of pure love, God makes them freely available to us because He wills that we should grow to be like to Him and, ultimately, to share with Him in heaven all the graces and blessings which He already enjoys. We can lose sanctifying grace if we commit a mortal sin. A mortal sin cuts us off from the charity of God, and God's life is no longer present within us. We can only recover sanctifying grace again by going to Confession, and we may not receive Holy Communion after committing a mortal sin *until* we have been to Confession.

Because grace is a quality rather than a thing, it can sometimes be hard to appreciate exactly what grace is, so the Bible, from cover to cover, is filled with examples of grace at work as well as with numerous images and metaphors for grace. Our Lord Himself used lots of images to describe grace. He said grace is like light which fills the soul and gives sight to the eyes of faith. He said grace was like the sap that runs through the trunk and branches of trees and plants, carrying nourishment to the branches so that they may bear fruit. The image He used most was that of water. Grace is poured into our souls as water is poured

into a vessel. Water cleans, it gives life, it carries nutrients, it refreshes, it causes goodness to spring up, and is necessary if there is to be fruit.

The Gospel passage about the Woman at the Well (Jn ch. 4) shows how actual grace can work on someone, drawing her gradually to a clearer understanding of God and the things of God, till the point when the soul is ready to be filled from the well of living water, which is Christ Himself. Perhaps it would be worthwhile to re-read this Gospel account at home whilst thinking of it in these terms. It can shed a whole new light on this encounter between Our Lord and the Woman.

Interestingly, St Therese of Lisieux says that we can expand our capacity for sanctifying grace through prayer, penance, and a life of virtue (or, correspondingly, reduce our capacity through a lack of these things). With that thought in mind, however well or otherwise you have done so far, I encourage you to persevere with your Lenten resolutions.