

<i>Date Preached</i>	11-Oct-2020	<i>Date Initiated</i>	28-Sept-2020
<i>Where Preached</i>	SAK	<i>Appointed Readings</i>	Pr 23, Yr A (Tr 2)
<i>Main Text</i>			

" Rejoice in the Lord always ... And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your mind in Christ Jesus. "



I don't know whether it is still the case, but way back when I was watching *Sesame Street*, each show was brought to you by a letter of the alphabet. Well, this morning's sermon is being brought to you by that most unlikely of letters: *X*.

X isn't really such an exotic letter to us, as a parish whose patron is St Andrew. Andrew was one of the twelve apostles, and legends from the tenth century have it that when he was martyred, he asked to be crucified on an *X*-shaped cross (also known as a "saltire"), because he felt unworthy to be put to death on the same cross as Our Savior.

If we push things a touch, *X* also plays a subtle role in the collect appointed for today. Today we pray that God's grace "may always precede and follow us." That may sound like just a spatial or spiritual construct: may we always be surrounded on all sides ... in all walks of life ... by the grace of God. And, to be sure, that is not a bad thing to pray for. But this collect runs a good bit deeper than that, for the verbs "precede" and "follow" are allusions to a centuries-old understanding of the two-fold nature of God's grace. "Preceding"—the old-fashioned word was "prevenient"—grace is the grace that God offers us of God's own initiative, both unbidden and unmerited by us. It is the grace of invitation: God's offer for us to become more and more deeply located in the eternal life and divine existence of God. And "*following*" (or "cooperating") grace is our *response* to God's preceding grace: Moved by preceding grace, our free will causes us to do good; in effect, to accept God's invitation into the rhythms of God's existence and, as a result, to show forth God's grace in our lives¹ ... in what we believe and in how we act. One seminal document in early Anglican history puts it this way: We have no power in us to do what is pleasing and acceptable to God unless God's grace first enters us, via Christ, in which case, we develop "good will." And when we have that good will, Christ works with us to *do good*.²

See, if you can, the cross-relationship here, the *X*: {DRAW *X* WITH FINGERS} When we respond to God's always-given first grace, we come to embody that grace in ourselves. And when we embody the grace of Christ, we enter more fully into the all-grace life of God. In literary terms, such an A-B-B-A relationship is called a chiasmus: *chi* (or "kai") being the Greek letter *X*. And as I studied the *X* in our collect for today, I came more and more to see the central verses of our reading from St Paul's letter to the Philippians today as a chiasmus on grace: grace in the key of *X*, if you will.

¹ See *ST*, I.II q. 111; MacQuarrie, *Principles*, 335-36.

² See XXXIX, art X (BCP, 869).

Paul's hymn of grace—and I hear it as a hymn—begins with the words "Rejoice in the Lord always." As I passed through the six lines of this hymn, I came to perceive a cross-relational structure: A-B-C : C-B-A. The first half of the hymn—the A-B-C section—begins in a particular *spiritual* posture or attitude: "Rejoice in the Lord always; and again, I say, rejoice." Next comes a *lived* response to the posture being taken: Rejoicing, be gentle—show forbearance—to everyone; be magnanimous in all things. And this, in turn, brings us to an understanding of *God's relationship* with us: The Lord is near. (Paul's meaning here may be eschatological—that is, he may be saying that Christ will come again soon, rather than speaking of His spiritual proximity to us. Both senses of *near*, however, are comforts to us.)

In the next three sentences, Paul takes up the same construct, but this time, in reverse—C-B-A—order. First, a statement of *God's relationship* with us: So near is Christ that there is no need for us to worry about anything. Next, a *lived* response: So instead of worrying, pray: ask God for everything you need and give thanks for what you already have. And to conclude as we began, a *spiritual* posture: Live in the peace of God, which guards your heart and mind.

In this *second* half of Paul's hymn, I see and hear the notion of *preceding* grace, the grace that God flows to us constantly, in love, and without any deserving on our part: Our calling is to gain awareness of it and begin to live into God's invitation:

- God is and always will be with us and for us; we have nothing to worry about.
 - We have only to voice our needs and give our thanks to God, Who always responds.
 - And as we live in *this* space, we come to know ... in our very beings, in the very core of who we are; through our senses and our emotions, and not our minds ... the peace of God that is beyond any intellectual understanding.
- God suffuses us ... We speak our hearts to God ... We grasp God's peace.

In the *first* half of Paul's hymn, conversely, I see and hear the idea of *following* (or cooperating) grace, the grace of our saying "Yes" to God's preceding grace and sinking more and more deeply into the eternal life and divine existence of God that Christ, through His death, resurrection and ascension, made fully available to us:

- Feeling and responding to God's grace in our lives, we have a spirit of joy and still more joy ("rejoice, and again, rejoice")
 - And this, divinely-gifted, all-encompassing joy delivers us from the normal, everyday slog of life—with all its competition, judgment, selfishness—to a disposition of generosity and forbearance; of kindness beyond reason (or whose only reason is Christ).
 - And when we live in the kindness of Christ, we are very near—if only briefly, if only glimpsingly—the mindset ... the ethos ... of God, who seeks to maximize all at the expense of none ... in the economy of God that is always abundance.
 - ... This, in turn, carries us right back to our having nothing to worry about, which is right where we started.

- We link our hearts to God's joy ... In joy, we are generous beyond measure And, in boundless love, we know God.

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One characteristic of the X-relationship of a chiasmus is that it can be read both forwards and backwards, for C-B-A is the mirror image of A-B-C. And in this, I perceive Paul's practical wisdom in composing this hymn as a chiasmus: Because both halves are equivalent, we may start at *either one*, depending on our current circumstances.

Sometimes ... as we contend with life, as we make our Christian journey ... we may struggle to know that God is, or that God is with us—we may not apprehend the grace that God is *always* sending our way. We may feel spiritually dry: like our prayers are going unheard or even that they're useless. In that case, says Paul, try to reconnect with the preceding grace of God, in Christ. We should pray *more*—loudly, beseechingly, even angrily. And as we give more and more over to Our Savior in prayer, our own free will is eventually overtaken by the Spirit's inexplicable peace, as it begins to grow and take hold of our lives.

On the other hand, sometimes we already 'know'—emotionally, spiritually—the grace of God in our lives, but we struggle with how to *respond* to it. (It's as if we have wonderful news to tell, but can't find the words to tell it.) In this case, Paul tells us, adopt a spirit of open-handed, heart-lifted generosity: forgive ... don't judge ... let go ... make allowances ... anticipate needs ... see the other side of every story. For this is the very attitude of God toward us, and when we latch onto it, it carries us deeper and deeper into the life of God in Christ.

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God's strongest desire is to be in relationship ... with you, with me, with everyone. God will never stop trying. God will adapt infinite varieties of ways: preceding, following, even standing on God's head or hanging upon a cross. And in so doing, God will strive to meet each of us just where we are, spiritually, emotionally or intellectually. All we need to do is sing the hymn of grace, in whatever key we can muster, even the key of X.



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