
¹⁸ But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.
To Him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity. Amen.

2 Peter 3:18 (NRSV)

On this weekend we are remembering 50 years of Grace Lutheran Primary School, and we do so in the context of also remember the Ascension of Jesus. The Ascension of Jesus is an important festival in the Christian Church calendar. Indeed, it is seen as so important that in some countries around the Ascension Day is a public holiday.

As we think of 50 years of Grace Lutheran Primary School, and the Ascension of our Lord Jesus, there is a theme that can be drawn together from these two celebrations – and that is the continuing and abiding presence of our Lord Jesus with us.

Here are some questions to consider. In what way do you see Jesus as being present in your life? (Discuss for a moment). As you think about Jesus being present in your life, in what ways do you see Jesus being present in ‘the church’ today? (as you think about this question, you may think about the different ways we use the word ‘church’. We may Christians in general. We may mean ‘Institutions’ like denominations. Or we may mean something like our local congregation. And then we may think about the ‘agencies’ of ‘the church’ such as Schools, Aged Care Homes, Hospitals, etc). In what ways do you see Jesus being ‘present’ in the world? How may other people see this differently?

The Ascension of Jesus does mean ‘Jesus is with us’. The Ascension of Jesus does not mean that Jesus is ‘up there’, and ‘not with us’. Indeed, as the Apostle Paul said this day (Ephesians 1:22-23): “God placed all things under Christ’s rule. He appointed Him to be ruler over everything for the church. The church is Christ’s body and is filled by Christ. Indeed, He fills everything in every way.” Jesus is ‘everywhere present’.

As “Christ fills everything in every way”, He fills every aspect of our life, and is involved in it. When we think of Grace Lutheran Primary School, we are saying that Jesus has been involved in this school from its conception more than 50 years ago, and is somehow still present in it. But how is Jesus ‘present’ in a school? Do we look at ‘achievements’? Do we think about how ‘good’ some people may seem to be? Do we celebrate human works and achievements?

For us, as a Lutheran Church, it goes against our DNA to celebrate ‘good works’. The Apostle Paul also says in Ephesians (2:8-9), “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast.”

This is not to speak against, or in any way seek to discourage 'doing good works', and striving daily to 'lead a holy life' (see also Ephesians 2:10: "For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.") But the Scriptures say, "Don't boast. Don't brag." And why does the Bible say this? Why is this important?

A story is told of a young boy learning to ride his bike. His father was walking alongside when the little boy saw some girls sitting on a porch. "Daddy, I got this!" he said. He didn't. Instead he fell over with a loud crash. He realised too late he hadn't learned to balance without his father's steadying grip. He wasn't as grown up as he thought.

Don't boast. Don't brag'. But "grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. To Him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity. Amen."

As Christians we are called to grow. Growth is a necessity, not an option. The Christian life is like riding a bike: if you aren't moving forward, you'll fall off. To maintain your steadfastness, you must be growing. If a child is not growing, they have serious health problems.

Growth is normal when there is life. After more than 25 years as a Christian, the apostle Paul wrote (Phil. 3:13-14), "Brothers and sisters, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet; but one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call in Christ Jesus."

The Bible calls us to grow. The Bible calls us to "grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ." Grace, of course, means, first, the undeserved love and favour which God in Jesus Christ bears to us sinful people. At a very simple level it means that each and every day, as we reflect on our life and failings, we come to appreciate more and more what God has done for us in Jesus.

And we 'Grow in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour.' The knowledge of a person is not the same as the knowledge of a creed or of a thought or of a book – not that these are unimportant. They are. For they guide us in the truth. We have to know the right things about Jesus if we are to grow in our relationship with Him (as we would with any other person). But the purpose is that we 'grow your acquaintance with our Saviour.'

When someone 'falls in love' with another person, for this love to last there needs to be continual growth in the relationship. We know that as we grow our bodies change, we have different experiences, and we still learn new things. Likewise, in a relationship between two people, there is meant to be continual growth. This is because as each person experiences different things, these experiences are meant to be brought together. Otherwise people will 'grow apart'. Likewise with our relationship with Jesus.

Ultimately, to grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour (note that word 'Saviour'), is to constantly recall the victory we have received through the blood of Jesus. The Bible says that faith is the victory that comes in Jesus our Saviour.

Being made a new creation gives you the power to re-imagine your life in a new direction. You are no longer bound to your past and the culture and environment in which you were raised because you are freed from the power of sin to live a complete life in Christ. The reality of a complete life comes through lifelong growth and learning everything you can about Christ and all He has done for you.

To grow in the Lord is not about doing more but to focus on knowing Him first. Peter is saying that as you trust in Christ as Saviour, you will see more of who He is and more of who you are through the Word of God. Grace gets us to God. Grace is our Saviour's soup for the soul: warming our affections, feeding our faith and meeting our every need.

As a Christian, have you ever asked yourself the question, "Am I missing something?" Yes, we understand the importance of the death, burial, and resurrection of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, but are we still missing the life God intends for us to have? Are we merely here to just sit and wait for heaven? We tend to look at the gospel as Jesus coming to get us out of hell and into heaven, which is true ... but not the whole story. The crux of the gospel is God getting out of heaven and into us.

This simple shift in perspective enables us to see God in a whole new light, and see ourselves as God's precious children who are loved and completely accepted. Rather than us striving to enter into His presence, we can begin to live a life understanding that He is with us always, and truly wants to spend every minute of our lives enjoying us, as much as we enjoy Him.

We are forever sealed, and in His presence. As God has said through the Apostle Paul, "And you also were included in Christ when you heard the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation. When you believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession—to the praise of his glory" (Ephesians 1:13-14).

How do you know that you are growing in grace, as opposed to just getting on with your life? Growth in grace is reflected in the following: You are growing in grace when you come to understand that God is sufficient to meet you. You will never test the resources and grace of God apart from hitting bottom. "My grace is sufficient for you," God told Paul. If you listen carefully, you will hear the same echo in your life. You are growing in grace when you cultivate a voice of praise instead of complaining about the circumstances. This is what Paul meant when he wrote, "Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus" (1 Thessalonians 5:18).

How then do we experience God's grace? We come to the Lord in our weakness, in our inability, in our sin and in our failure. In the story of the prodigal son in Luke 15, the prodigal son left home, squandered his father's wealth, finally realising his need and his father's possible kindness: "How many of my father's hired men have more than enough bread but I am dying here of hunger? I will get up and go to my father and I will say to him, 'Father I have sinned against heaven and in your sight. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me as one of your hired men.'" (Verses 17-19). He humbled himself and went towards his father. And the father still loved that prodigal son no matter what he had done.

John Powell said this, "We think we have to change, grow and be good in order to be loved. But rather we are loved and we receive His grace so we can change, grow and be good." On the cross, Jesus died for our sin, for our badness. We were guilty and He paid for the guilt. When we confess our sins, we are taking care of what is wrong and what the cross already pays for. Being a child of God is a matter of being humble and truthful about our sin, and accepting His grace, and growing in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

By Jesus' bodily ascension into heaven in the sight of His followers, Jesus helped them (and us) to see that His Kingdom is within us and comes into existence as, through His forgiveness, He frees us from our sins and the guilt of sin; through His Word and His rich blessings of the Sacraments: Holy Baptism and the Lord's Supper, He empowers us to live under Him in His Kingdom and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence and blessedness. To Him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity. Amen.