

GRACE AND PEACE ¹

A sermon preached by Associate Professor Michael Horsburgh AM in St James' Church, King Street, Sydney, on the Fourth Sunday of Advent, 18 December 2022

To all God's beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints:
Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.²

Come, thou long expected Jesus,
born to set thy people free;
from our fears and sins release us,
let us find our rest in thee.

Israel's strength and consolation,
hope of all the earth thou art;
dear desire of every nation,
joy of every longing heart.

Born thy people to deliver,
born a child and yet a King,
born to reign in us forever,
now thy gracious kingdom bring.

By thine own eternal spirit
rule in all our hearts alone;
by thine all sufficient merit,
raise us to thy glorious throne.³

This sermon is about grace and peace, but I start with Charles Wesley's Advent hymn. I do this because it echoes the theme that I wish to pursue. It is about grace and peace.⁴

Today is also Charles Wesley's birthday. He was born on this day in 1707 in the rectory of the parish of Epworth in Lincolnshire, the eighteenth child of Samuel and Susanna Wesley. His original education was at the hands of his highly educated mother, who taught her children reading, writing, mathematics, theology, philosophy, Greek, Latin, and French with methods that would be regarded as overly severe today.⁵ Nevertheless, her strictness taught each of her children, female and male, who were educated equally, that they were valued and wanted.

Although I have begun with Charles Wesley, I want to pursue grace and peace through the eyes of our Advent study author, Rowan Williams. If we start with grace, for Williams, being valued and wanted, as Charles was, is part of the definition of grace. He says:

¹ Readings: Isaiah 7:10-16; Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19; Romans 1:1-7; Matthew 1:18-25

² Romans 1:7

³ Charles Wesley (18 December 1707-29 March 1788), first published in *Hymns for the Nativity of Our Lord*, Hymn X [Hymns for the nativity of our Lord. 1750 : Wesley, John. : Free Download, Borrow, and Streaming : Internet Archive](#)

⁴ *New English Hymnal*, 3

⁵ [SGAUMC | Susanna Wesley's Rules for Raising Godly Children](#) and [Repost: How Susanna Wesley Home-schooled Ten Children | Just Call Me Pastor \(wordpress.com\)](#)

Grace, for the Christian believer, is a transformation that depends in large part on knowing yourself to be seen in a certain way: as significant, as wanted. ...

The whole story of creation, incarnation and our incorporation into the fellowship of Christ's body tells us that God desires us, *as if we were God* We are created so that we may be caught up in this; so that we may grow into the wholehearted love of God by learning that God loves us as God loves God. The life of the Christian community has as its rationale - if not invariably its practical reality - the task of teaching us this: so ordering our relations that human beings may see themselves as desired, as the occasion of joy.⁶

Whilst we may rejoice to hear this, we may not always feel it. How many of us harbour feelings of unworthiness? How many of us feel that God is constantly judging us? How many of us feel uncertain of who and what we are? Most of us, I suspect, in one way or another. Our outward confidence can easily hide an interior uncertainty.

So, we need to come to terms with an inconsistency between our felt uncertainty and the theological certainty of which Williams speaks. When we talk about God's love, we are talking about the most fundamental and existential reality. We know well that our contemporary world rejects the notion that we are in any way dependent on such a reality. Instead, we are, our world believes, able to make ourselves into any image that we choose. How often do we hear popular commentators say that we can do anything that we wish. No sober reflection could come to such a nonsensical conclusion. Whatever I may achieve and excel at, I simply cannot do whatever I want, however hard I may try. Such conceit underpins the uncertainty that we all feel.

Our uncertainty can also be fostered by the very institutions that are supposed to help us. Williams refers to this when he suggests that the church has 'not invariably' in practical terms shown to all its members, let alone humanity at large, that they are "desired [and are] objects of joy". On the contrary, many groups have been regarded as undesirable and to be excluded from joy.

The reality is that my identity is ensured not by ephemeral events, nor by institutions, but by grace. In our Advent study book, Williams comments in relation to the Lord's Prayer and the request for our daily bread:

Part of what we are praying for in these words is the grace to receive our own humanity as a gift.⁷

Similarly, in his book, *Being Human*, Williams says:

... the acknowledgement of that level of dependence is, very importantly, part of what sets us free because it acquaints us with what is *true* about us; we depend on what is not ours, what is not us, our will our hope, our achievement.⁸

If that is grace, what about peace? If we are right in our understanding of grace, we may find that grace leads to peace, at least in the personal sense. We may be helped to be at peace with ourselves, a not insignificant gift. But peace is not only an internal quality. Peace is a quality

⁶ Rowan Williams, *The Body's Grace*, [Link II \(anglican.ca\)](#)

⁷ Rowan Williams, *Being Disciples*, London, SPCK, 2006, p. 38

⁸ Rowan Williams, *Being Human*, London, SPCK, 2018, p. 72

of the public world, one that we might now imagine is lacking. This will not be a Christmas of peace on earth and good will to all.

In his Archbishop of Canterbury's Lent book of 1983, Rowan Williams discussed the question of peace at large in the context of the troubles in Northern Ireland, the civil war in Lebanon⁹ and the Falklands war between the United Kingdom and Argentina.¹⁰ He contrasted two opposing views about war and peace.

He said that the first view is that "conflict is not only as a matter of fact unavoidable but somehow natural, in the grain of things."¹¹ Such a view, Williams argues, diminishes us all and commits us to a life of rivalry and self-seeking. He identifies an alternative view, one that does not deny the reality of the forces that lead to war, but one that holds a

... sombre realism about our deceitfulness and passionate unreasonableness qualified by trust in the presence of truth within human history. The former vision becomes bearable, we can face it honestly, when (and only when) we are prepared to participate in a community of truthfulness.¹²

In the church, we know that Williams speaks correctly. Our experience with child sexual abuse has shown us the absolute necessity of a community of truth, not one of self-seeking and defensiveness.

How do we respond to the offer of grace and peace? The incarnation for which we wait is God's embodiment in our lives, God's living among us, our Emmanuel. I conclude with an address that Williams gave in Lincoln Cathedral in 2010. It speaks to how we can, in turn, enter a living, sustaining relationship and embody grace and peace.

And so in our age and in the age that lies ahead, ... [w]e need to point quite simply to the God who does not let go, to the Christ who does not run away—and (here's the rub) we need ourselves to be dependable people. We need to be people in dependable relationship, people who are there for those who feel abandoned and for those who don't know who and where they are. By our faithfulness to the lost, the suffering, the marginal we begin to show what it is to have faith in the one who doesn't let go. And one of the biggest challenges to the Church in our age is how we embody that kind of dependability in this society and throughout the world, which does require a bit of a shift in the kind of Church we think we are, given that we are most commonly perceived as people who are anxious who they should say 'no' to.¹³

Born thy people to deliver,
born a child and yet a King,
born to reign in us forever,
now thy gracious kingdom bring.

To all God's beloved in St James, who are called to be saints:
Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

⁹ [1982 Lebanon War - Wikipedia](#)

¹⁰ [Falklands War - Wikipedia](#)

¹¹ Rowan Williams, *The Truce of God*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1982 and 2005, p.111

¹² Williams *Truce*, pp. 122-123

¹³ Rowan Williams, [Faith, hope and charity in tomorrow's world \(archbishopofcanterbury.org\)](#) Lincoln Cathedral, 6 March 2010

H Y M N X.

I.

COME Thou long expected JESUS,
Born to set thy People free ;
From our Fears and Sins relieve us,
Let us find our Rest in thee ;
Israel's Strength and Consolation,
Hope of all the Earth thou art,
Dear Desire of every Nation,
Joy of every longing Heart.

II.

Born thy People to deliver,
Born a Child and Yet a King,
Born to reign in Us for ever,
Now thy gracious Kingdom bring :
By thine own eternal Spirit
Rule in all our Hearts alone ;
By thine all sufficient Merit
Raise us to thy glorious Throne.



Charles Wesley



Rowan Williams