

The Kindness of God. Bethesda Coffee Morning. 17 August 2011.

God willing, this time next Wednesday most of us will have just left the Good News Centre in Newent – on our way to Evesham for lunch. This past Lord's day, Noreen returned to Linda and me a short booklet which we lent to her and Ivor some time ago, which details the story behind the Good News Centre – of how it began, and why. Let me quote one sentence from the closing section of that booklet ... ['In a world often dominated by bad news, our aim is to be a place where the emphasis is placed on Good News'.]

As no doubt you know, the word 'gospel' means just that ... good news. The last two weeks, we have benefited from talks given by Mr John Baker. And those of you with good memories will recall that prior to John's visits, we had a series of ten talks on the Character of God. Then we covered several key aspects of God's character – His wisdom, knowledge, power, presence, holiness, righteousness, goodness, love, changelessness and faithfulness. But there was one aspect of His character which we did not have time to mention ... an aspect of His character which figures quite largely in the gospel – in the 'good news' of which the booklet spoke. I refer to God's 'kindness'.

It is a sad fact that in our modern self-centred, 'dog-eat-dog' society 'kindness' has taken very much a back seat. And yet the New Testament makes it abundantly clear that Christians are meant to be kind. For example, the apostle Paul wrote to the church at Colosse in Asia Minor, 'Clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and longsuffering; bearing with one another, and forgiving one another, if any one have a grievance against another: even as the Lord forgave you, so also you must do'.¹

The Greek word used there – and elsewhere – for kindness sounds almost the same as the Greek word for 'Christian' ... something which is true also of the equivalent Latin words. And one Christian author, writing about 200 AD from Carthage in North Africa, noted that many non-Christians of his day confused the two words, and thereby gave to believers a name which described them as people marked by kindness.² Which was indeed what they should have been – and what all who are Christians today should be.

But this morning I want to focus, not on the kindness which *should* characterise all Christians, but on the kindness which *does* characterise God Himself. And I will limit myself to just two quotations taken from the letters of the apostle Paul.

In the first, Paul spoke of God showing 'the exceeding riches of His grace in His kindness to us in Christ Jesus'.³ And, in the second, he wrote, 'when the kindness and the love of God our Saviour toward man appeared, not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us'.⁴

'The kindness and the love of God our Saviour toward man appeared', of course, in His sending His Son, the Lord Jesus, to suffer and die for us. It was out of kindness that God took the initiative, that He might save men and women, not because of anything which they do, but because of that which the Lord Jesus did. And it is there, in the supreme kindness towards man which God showed at the cross of Christ, that He demonstrated 'the exceeding riches of His grace' to us.

I read some time ago a story told by a famous American evangelist about a group of tourists visiting a picturesque village who walked by an old man sitting beside a fence. In a rather patronizing way, one tourist asked, "Were any great men born in this village?" The old man replied, "Nope, only babies".⁵

Well, the date today is the 17th August. And I can tell you of a baby born exactly 250 years ago today in the very small village of PAULERS-BURY some twelve miles from Northampton – the whole parish, which includes two other villages, numbers only around 1,000 inhabitants even today.

But on the 17th August 1761, a baby boy was born to Edmund and Elizabeth Carey, this Edmund Carey being a weaver by trade. But his son, William by name, became one of the greatest Christian missionaries to have ever lived.

Last week this time Linda and I were on holiday with our son James, his wife Alex and our grandson Nathanael – who has visited us here once or twice in the past. Not long ago, James and his family spent a year in India, where James taught mathematics in a Christian school in a place called Ootacamund high up in the mountains.

And it was to India that William Carey went at the age of 32 – some 15 years after his conversion. He arrived, with his wife, his four young sons, his wife's sister and a fellow missionary at Calcutta in November 1793. Mr Carey never saw England again, for he remained in India until his death there 40 years later.

During his time there he established a medical mission, a leper hospital and forty-five schools. He founded both the Agricultural and Horticultural Society of India and a College to train indigenous Christian leaders – which College continues to this day.

But by far his greatest contribution to the spread of the Christian gospel lay in the field of Bible translation. Mr Carey was an extremely capable linguist and scholar and personally translated the Bible into seven different languages. Apart from which, he and his fellow-workers supervised the translation of the New Testament into no less than twenty-three languages, thereby making God's word accessible for the first time to one third of the world population of his day.

Before his death, the printing press which he had built issued over 213,000 copies of the scriptures in forty different languages. It has been said, and I have no reason to doubt the fact, that William Carey was responsible for producing more translations of the Bible than had been accomplished in all of the previous seventeen Christian centuries combined. It was a colossal achievement.⁶

And yet, for all this, Mr Carey was a most humble and self-effacing man. Towards the close of his life, when very ill, he received a visit from a young missionary who spoke much to him of his (Mr Carey's) work. When the young missionary rose to leave, Mr Carey said quietly, 'Mr. Duff, you have been speaking about Dr. Carey, Dr. Carey. When I am gone, say nothing about Dr. Carey — speak about Dr. Carey's Saviour'.

But what, you may be wondering has all this to do with the kindness of God. Simply this, that in his last will and testament, Mr Carey left the following instructions to the executors of that will⁷, 'I direct that my funeral be as plain as possible ... and that the following inscription and nothing more may be cut on the stone ... "William Carey. Born : 17 August 1761. Died : (whenever). A wretched poor and helpless worm, on Thy kind arms I fall"'. A block of marble carrying those words – amended only by the addition of the date of his death, 9 June 1834 – still marks the spot where Mr Carey's body was laid when He went to be with Christ at the age of 72.⁸

His chosen epitaph, 'A wretched poor and helpless worm, on Thy kind arms I fall', was taken from a verse of a hymn written by Isaac Watts a century before.⁹ 'Kind arms' indeed, for they are the arms of the God who, as we noted earlier, has showed 'the exceeding riches of His grace in His kindness to us in Christ Jesus'.

I began by quoting from the short booklet about the Good News Centre in Newent. And I close with another quote from there ... ['We must choose. We can go on *doing our best* ... or we can thank God for *what Jesus has done*, renounce our past, and receive by faith the gift of new life from Jesus'.]

And everyone of us here today has to make that choice for himself or herself – doing our best or trusting in that which the Lord Jesus did for us at the cross.

Footnotes

¹ Col. 3. 12-13.

² 'Well now, if there is this dislike of the name, what blame can you attach to names? What accusation can you bring against mere designations, save that something in the word sounds either barbarous, or unlucky, or scurrilous, or unchaste? The name Christian indeed, so far as its meaning is concerned, is derived from 'anointing'. And even when it is wrongly pronounced "Chrestianus" by you--for neither is there any real knowledge of the name among you--it is made up from sweetness or kindness. You hate, therefore, in the guiltless, even a guiltless name'. (Tertullian, Apology, Chapter 3, Paragraph 5.)

Compare the words of Tacitus, 'Consequently, to get rid of the report, Nero fastened the guilt and inflicted the most exquisite tortures on a class hated for their abominations, called Chrestiani by the populace. Chrestus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilatus, and a most mischievous superstition, thus checked for the moment, again broke out not only in Judaea, the first source of the evil, but even in Rome, where all things hideous and shameful from every part of the world find their centre and become popular. Accordingly, an arrest was first made of all who pleaded guilty; then, upon their information, an immense multitude was convicted, not so much of the crime of firing the city, as of hatred against mankind. Mockery of every sort was added to their deaths. Covered with the skins of beasts, they were torn by dogs and perished, or were nailed to crosses, or were doomed to the flames and burnt, to serve as a nightly illumination, when daylight had expired'. Tacitus, Annals, Chapter 15, Paragraph 44.

³ Eph. 2. 7.

⁴ Tit 3. 5.

⁵ In The Last Days Newsletter, the American evangelist (born in Leeds, UK) Leonard Ravenhill tells about a group of tourists visiting a picturesque village who walked by an old man sitting beside a fence. In a rather patronizing way, one tourist asked, "Were any great men born in this village?" The old man replied, "Nope, only babies." <http://bible.org/illustration/only-babies>. See too <http://strongmeatformaturity.blogspot.com/2009/04/brief-biography-of-leonard-ravenhill.html>

⁶ See ... 'Life of William Carey', by George Smith. Available at ...

<http://www.reformedreader.org/rbb/carey/lifeofwilliamcarey/wcareytc.htm>

⁷ Mack and William Robinson.

⁸ It lies in the Serampore Christian burial grounds. It can be viewed at ...

<http://mosesonmissions.wordpress.com/2008/11/27/william-carey-father-of-modern-missions/>

⁹ Hymns and Spiritual Songs, by Isaac Watts. Verse 6 of number 2:90. At ... <http://www.fullbooks.com/Hymns-and-Spiritual-Songs5.html>