

## Sermon Sunday 26th June

I want to share with you this morning a recent book I read by Philip Yancey titled 'Vanishing Grace, Whatever Happened to the Good News? Philip Yancey is an American evangelical journalist. Years back I read another of his books that I admired 'What's so Amazing about Grace'. In Vanishing Grace he raises questions I've thought about for years

1. Why does the Christian Church, or branches of it, evoke not only indifference but hostile anger?
2. He models 3 ways we can do better.
3. Is the gospel good news?

1. Negative attitudes to the Christian Church statistics are troubling. We now live in a country where 50% have no religious affiliations.

In America the divisions are very stark. Evangelicals align with the Republican Party and helped elect probably the most corrupt President they've ever had - Donald Trump.

Surveys show more view Christians as bearers of bad news, not good news. One said "when Christians talk to you they act as if you are a robot. They have an agenda to promote and, if you don't agree with them, they're done with you. Over the past few months I've been amazed at the scrutiny that a section of the Christian Church has come under ;

The Independent Pentecostal Mega Churches

Destiny church and Brian Tamaki

Arise Church in Wellington, where the 2 founding brothers have resigned, leaving with property worth millions of dollars

Celebration Church in Christchurch, where the pastor and his family have built up great wealth

Hillsong, the Houston family started in NZ, moved to Australia and now have branches in many parts of the world. Brian Houston has been dismissed and pastors accused of lavish spending and sexual impropriety. Often difficult to find out how much their ministers are paid.

As Prof Peter Lindeham put it "In our churches there is transparency and accountability, we know where every dollar goes."

They are all privately owned businesses directed by visionary, charismatic entrepreneurs. The pastors are keen to find roles for their children in their churches which are, in effect, proprietorial chapels.

They do well to ponder the ugly story of Robert Schulle's Crystal Cathedral in L.A. when his children disputed the succession the ministry went bankrupt and the Crystal Cathedral was bought by the Roman Catholic Diocese.

And then there's Gloriavale. Christians are often seen as judgemental and hypocritical always saying NO

In a survey on 'Is Religion a Force for Good' here are the percentages for the countries who said "Yes"

Saudi Arabia 92% United States 65% Australia 32% Sweden 19%

Yancey came across 4 common complaints about Christians

- \* you don't listen to me
- \* you judge
- \* your faith confuses me
- \* you talk about what's wrong instead of making it right Love is absent.

In the Old Testament in one verse it commands 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself' but in no fewer than 36 places commands us to love the stranger.

And then a command found in no other religion, Jesus bids us to love our enemies. We need to learn humility rather than giving the impression that we have all the answers.

Jesus had the uncanny ability to look at everyone with grace — healed eyes, seeing not only the beauty of who they were but also the sacred potential of what they could become. We, his followers, have the same challenge.

Evangelist Mark Rutland recalls a survey in which Americans were asked what words they would most like to hear \* I love you \* I forgive you the 3rd choice took him by surprise \* supper's ready we would say 'Dinner's ready'

A neat summary of the gospel story, We are loved by God, forgiven by God and invited to the banquet table.

The church needs to become a place where 'grace is on tap'

One church expressed this way;

Married, divorced or single here, it's one family that mingles here,

We've Conservative or Liberal here, we've all gotta give a little here,

Big or small here, there's room for us all here, Doubt or believe here, we all can receive here, Gay or straight here, there's no hate here,

Woman or man here, everyone can serve here,

Whatever your race here, for all of us grace here,

In imitation of the ridiculous love God has for each of us and all of us, Let us live and love without labels.

The root meaning in Hebrew of salvation is to be broad, to become spacious, to enlarge. It carries the sense of deliverance from an existence that has become compressed, confined and cramped.

We need to live fulfilled lives, abundant and thirst-satisfying.

## Part 2 Grace Dispenses

Yancy believed there are 3 kinds of Christians that outsiders to the faith still respect pilgrims, activists and artists.

Pilgrims on the way and not a superior class. A pilgrim is a fellow traveller on the spiritual journey not a professional guide, Ordinary pilgrims living a different way.

Often getting it wrong.

And yet the church is above all a place to receive grace, it brings forgiven people together with the aim of equipping others to dispense grace to others.

We are a pilgrim community. What does a healthy community of pilgrims look like? Yancey decided to visit a different church each Sunday.

Some churches made him feel welcome right away, in others he felt like an intruder.

Yancey believed he could sense the 'aliveness' of a congregation within 5 minutes. Were people conversing in the foyer? Did he hear the sound of laughter? What was on the noticeboard?

In 2 of the most conservative churches members slumped in the pews and glumly went through the motions while the minister acted as if his main aim was to get to the benediction.

After visiting 24 churches the qualities to look for in a healthy congregation of pilgrims was to serve others faithfully administering God's grace in various forms. Diversity is the primary testing ground of grace. We are a mixed bag and I have often wondered how any congregation stays together.

Yancey never found a perfect church and we shouldn't expect it either. Some put him to sleep while others were trying to be so modern that he forgot why he had come. We always need to fix our eyes on Jesus

Activist

Jesus set out his platform "The Spirit of the Lord is on me because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free."

Guided by the Golden Rule we need to live out our beliefs, progressing from hand to heart to head.

Activists believe that in ministering to the vulnerable they are following Jesus. It's maintaining a faithful presence within our society, it's standing up to our beliefs and lives and what the church is doing. It's about the common good, caring for all people. We can all be activists, subversives.

I've only been on a couple of protest marches — against the Springbok Tour and No. Maoris No Tour years back. I put my head up in supporting Assisted Dying. I speak up when I hear anti-Semitic language, racist talk, anti-gay rhetoric, conspiracy theories.

I think of the non-violent campaigners who take on causes such as slavery, war, poverty, women's rights. Slowly change takes place and we have a more compassionate and just society.

You may not see yourself as an activist but when you stand and speak up for your faith, you are.

### Artists

The creative arts can be a compelling path to faith that can cut through our defences, awaken thirst and cut right to the heart. Visiting an art gallery, watching a film or play, listening to music.

I think of Shirley Murray's hymns, I think of Harriet Beecher Stowe who wrote Uncle Tom's Cabin and forced a nation to change.

One stage musical that I love is Les Miserables — I've seen it several times and read Victor Hugo's novel. Why is it so loved? I think because Jean Valjean manifested all the Christian virtues without being obnoxious or condescending.

It's a very touching story, had more Christians acted like Jean Valjean and the Bishop and less like Javert many may not have lost their heads!

I think of Jesus who gave his most enduring truths in the form of parables, homespun stories shaped out of his listeners daily lives. His parables are open ended, free to be interpreted in many ways.

Pilgrim, activist, artist, whatever our calling, to join together to proclaim the good news that Jesus has commissioned us to announce to the world.

That God wants us to thrive, to live with joy and not repression, trust and not fear.

The gospel is intended for our own good, our well being.

I think of the remarkable people I've met in the congregations I've served who have dedicated their lives to humble service, quietly living out their faith as most followers of Jesus do.

Is the gospel good news? It surely is, if it is grace filled.