

Inadequacy & Grace

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1 Kings 19:1-8; Psalm 42, Luke 7:36-8:3; Galatians 2:15-21
(20 minutes)

Theme: *"God responds with grace to our inevitable frailty and inadequacy"*

Introduction. I need to share with you some of what I have been going through in my relationship with God over the past month or so, because it influences how I understood today's readings. I have my prayer life dominated lately by an awareness of my own inadequacy. I keep coming back to the frailty and feebleness of my faith. Preaching is a real challenge for me, because I feel that if you knew how thin my faith really was, you would run me out of St Martins. I often sit out there in the congregation and look at Alan and Marijke and others up here and think that they seem to have such a strong faith – why can't I be more like them – and I feel inadequate and pathetic all over again. And so I've been grappling with God over why he seems so absent, why it's so hard for me to pray, why I forget about him so easily, why he doesn't demonstrate his existence more absolutely.

So I had to laugh when I began studying today's readings a couple of weeks ago, because all four of them talk about people who had frail faith – I could relate to every one of them. And they describe God's response to that frailty. What I'd like to share with you is what I've learned from these readings about my own inadequate faith, hoping it may be helpful to you too.

Let's pray and then look at the Scriptures.

Elijah. We start in 1 Kings 19. This passage follows on from chapter 17, which Alan preached on last week, where Elijah raised the widows son back to life. And chapter 18, which we have not read, relates that incredible story of the standoff between Elijah and the priests of Baal. If you've heard Mendelssohn's oratorio, *Elijah*, you will never forget that scene. So, Elijah had just been an instrument of God's power and presence.

And then he is threatened by Jezebel, a formidable woman, and he was terrified and runs for his life. His faith in God crumbles and all he can do is flee. He goes out alone into the desert and falls down under a tree and wills himself to die. That's what he went out for – he wanted to die. "I have had enough, Lord," he says. "Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors." I'm too tired, too worn out, too overwhelmed to continue. I'm just an ordinary person, nothing special.

And this is one of the things that give me great comfort. When we look at Elijah we think of him as a great man of faith – I could never be like him. But great faith is not something that Elijah or we can 'possess', as if it belong to us. Rather, God is great and he has great faith. Elijah was just a man whom God chose to work through. The greatness belongs to God. And so there is a sense that God can use anyone, even me, regardless of how big or small my faith is.

Now I expected God to come down and reprimand Elijah. "How can you fall apart now, after everything that you've done and after seeing how powerful and present I am? Get up you pathetic person, I don't know why I put up with you." Actually, these are the things I would say to myself if I were Elijah! I would criticize and belittle myself for being frail.

But this is not what God does. Rather, God sends his angels to care for Elijah. They bring food and drink, and they encourage him. He eats and rests, and then they come again and he eats again. And the angels say, "Get up and eat, for the journey is too much for you." God recognises that Elijah has been pushed further than he is able, that he has been stretched

beyond endurance. And God's response is not to chastise, but to nurture, and sustain and encourage.

It reminds me of how Jesus met the disciples at the sea of Galilee after the crucifixion, and provided them with bread and fish baked over a fire, at a time when their faith had fallen apart. So I draw comfort from this truth – that God's response to our frailty is not to rebuke or break down, but rather to recognise our feebleness and to care for us.

Psalmist. Let's turn next to the psalm, Psalm 42. This psalm opens with words that are so well known to us – "As the deer pants for streams of living water, so my soul pants for you, O God". There is a desperate thirst here, which is often how I feel spiritually. My prayer life of late has been much like this psalm – a kind of internal dialogue between these two parts of myself. The one part feels alone and hungry and wishing that God were more obviously present. But the other part knows that God is here and that he loves me. I think this second part is probably the Holy Spirit inside me.

So, we have the psalmist crying out to God. She grapples with God, trying to figure out why he behaves as he does. "When can I go and meet with God?" she asks. "Why have you forgotten me? Why must I go about mourning? Why am I oppressed by the enemy?" She challenges and questions God, who seems so absent from her life. And she weeps, "Tears have been my food day and night". So the psalmist has a failure of faith.

But the little voice in the psalmist's head says, "Remember. Remember how you used to go with the multitude praising God, leading the procession to the house of God. Put your hope in God." So in the midst of the crisis, the psalmist remembers a time when God did not seem absent, but rather when God seemed near and present. And he remembers these times as a way of encouraging himself now, when God seems far away.

When I look back over my life, there are times when God seemed very present and I felt my faith was strong. And times when God seemed absent and I felt my faith was weak. In retrospect, I recognise that God was still present during those times when he seemed absent. I felt he was far off, but actually he was right here all the time. And so he is probably right here now, even though I can't sense him. God does not abandon me because my faith is frail, because I can't sense him, because I feel cut off. God is present throughout. And what I gain from this psalm is the courage to grapple with God about it. I am grateful that a psalm like this, which questions God and which shows frail faith, has been included in the Word of God, in the Scriptures, because it portrays very real, human and vulnerable faith.

Sinful Woman. Let's turn forward then to Luke 7:36-50. Here we have an amazing story about a nameless woman. She is one of the many woman who have no names in the Gospels – the Samaritan woman by the well, the woman caught in adultery. These women have no names, and yet fabulous stories centre on them.

Jesus had gone for dinner with a Pharisee names Simon. And while they were eating, a woman comes to visit. She "had lived a sinful life." She was probably a sex worker, a prostitute. And she comes and blesses Jesus' feet.

Now Simon is horrified, because she is a sinner. He feels that if Jesus knew what a bad person she was, he would feel defiled and would reject her, turn her away because she sullies him. Certainly she does not live up to our standards, and if this happened here at our church, we would probably react like Simon. I know I react to myself like that – you've such a bad person, how could God possibly accept you, listen to you, care for you?

And yet Jesus does not reject her. He welcomes her, affirms her, accepts her, loves her, forgives her. "Your sins are forgiven" he tells her. "Your faith has saved you. Go in peace."

Now the woman brought to Jesus what she had. She didn't have much, but what she did have, she brought. She brought her tears, which we all have, and wet his feet with them. She brought her long hair – probably a tool of her trade – and used it to wipe his feet clean. She used her mouth – which had probably kissed many men – and kissed his feet. And she

brought perfume – which probably used to attract customers – and blessed Jesus' feet with it. These were the things she had – yes they were tainted things, not pure, but that is what she had and that is what she brought and that is what Jesus accepted. There was no expectation that she must get herself all sorted out, dolled up, purified and made respectable. She just brought what she had.

And I am learning that that is all that God wants from me – to bring what I have. Often it feels like not much of anything. And yet, that is what Jesus wants – that which I have. I don't have buckets of faith, like other people seem to have. I just have flakes of faith, grains really. It is so little as to be almost nothing. And yet, that is what Jesus wants – that little bit. And when I bring that frail and feeble faith to him, he blesses it. He accepts it.

Paul. And lastly, we look at Galatians 2:15-21. This is one of those theologically dense passages of Paul, that we could get lost in for weeks. And I just want to pull out one key thought from this. Paul explains that our feeling of inadequacy is not just a feeling, but a fact. We actually are inadequate. This is the whole point of the law and the law's demand for righteousness. None of us can live up to its standards, to God's standards. We all fall short – whether we have much faith or little, whether we live good lives or bad, we all fail to meet the standards. And so the feeling of inadequacy, of frailty, is a valid feeling, not a neurosis. I think that Paul grappled with this issue, because it appears often in his letters.

But what Paul recognises is grace. God is willing and able to accept us, despite our inadequacy and frailty, because of Jesus, because of what Jesus did for us on the cross. And this is not something we earn or deserve by being adequate or strong. It is a gift from God, through Jesus, that we just receive because he just loves us. "I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" says Paul. It is not that God doesn't know or can't see that we are frail, imperfect, vulnerable. It is rather that he loves us anyway.

Conclusion. Where I have been coming to over the past while is to come to terms with my own frailty. I'm not a great person of faith, and I struggle with all kinds of things. And so I am not worthy. But I am also not worthless. "I am not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under your table; you are the same Lord, whose nature is always to have mercy." And with this realisation, I continue to grapple with and engage with God, like the psalmist did, and to ask him all the 'why' questions and to plead for stronger faith and a greater sense of his presence. And in his own way God cares for and nurtures me, and I experience a lifting of the feelings of inadequacy. And through all of this, I try to bring what I have to him, no matter how small or how tainted, I just bring it and lay it at his feet and trust that he will accept it and bless it. And there is comfort in that.

ⁱ This sermon brewed over a period of several weeks, as I explain in the introduction. I was not feeling well in the week leading up to the sermon – my voice was only half there and I felt bad. This seemed to increase my feeling of frailty and vulnerability and introspection, which actually worked well during the sermon. I experienced, as always, God's grace during the preaching – my voice stabilised and my mind cleared and I was able to convey my emotions. And when I sat down afterwards, I felt the flu descend again in full force.

I got good feedback from people, who felt I had expressed what they felt but could not express, for fear of being judged. A few people said I was one of those they looked at as a person of 'great faith'. I'm not sure what effect this outing of myself as just a frail person will have on the community. A couple of people have said the sermon lingered with them for days afterwards.

Perhaps the expressing and evoking emotion and my making myself vulnerable (thus earnest and genuine) combined to create a emotive experience that penetrated and stayed after the words had faded? Not something I'd want to do every week! But it seems to have been fruitful this time.