

**“As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.” Colossians 3: 12 - 17**

Dear Friends,

The words above form one of my favourite passages of Scripture. They describe a life transformed by the presence, power, and grace of the Holy Spirit. They speak of how followers of Jesus can live their lives in community together but also in mission to the world. They give a picture of what it means to *“let your light so shine before all people that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven,”* as Jesus expresses our calling in Matthew 5: 16.

I have a feeling that our society is going to need its Christian communities to intentionally live out this sort of life over the coming months.

We are all aware of the growing fear and gloom in our land caused by the coronavirus and the restrictions we are having to live under and by the threat of no trade deal being agreed with the European Union.

We are aware that infection rates are rising, hospitalisations are rising, and sadly the number of deaths is now starting to follow suite.

We are aware of the increasing burden of mental illness being caused by the isolation that our covid restrictions place on so many people.

And we are now starting to see unemployment figures rise. This will inevitably lead to increases in numbers living in poverty or being made homeless.

Our political parties and the countries of our Union are growing further apart and if no trade deal is agreed then we will see inflation on the rise. It is going to be a difficult winter for an awful lot of folk.

A line from Shakespeare’s *“Richard III,”* springs to mind, *“Now is the winter of our discontent!”* They are the opening words of a speech by *Gloucester* as he plots to cause havoc between his brother, *Clarence*, and King Edward. The battle for power always brings out the worst in human nature. It leads to blame and counter-blame with little concern for responsibility and humble service.

Through the power of the Spirit Jesus offers us another way to address the issues which will face our society, our communities and our churches over the coming weeks and months. It can be summed up in a single word: *“Grace.”*

Rather than laying blame and seeking to cause discontent, we are called to build bridges, to live in unity, to be kind, humble, meek, and patient.

Over the last few months, we have necessarily had to focus on the pastoral care of our members and on keeping our churches financially viable. But now that many of our churches are finding new ways to gather, worship and work, I think perhaps it is time for us to turn our eyes outwards rather than inwards.

Over the coming months we are going to see growing levels of need in our communities, even perhaps within the membership of our churches. How might we use the resources at our disposal – resources of time, energy, buildings, finance, love and creativity – to be a blessing to our world, to offer hope to those who feel it has been snatched away from under their feet?

One very practical suggestion I can make concerns what we call “Benevolence Funds.” Each of our churches should have such a fund in place and usually they are topped up through retiring offerings at Communion Services. However, perhaps your church might consider moving money from reserves or bequests into your benevolence fund so that you can quickly help to relieve cases of need when they arise in your congregation or local community. A second suggestion might be what some of our churches are already doing, holding regular collections for foodbanks or other organisations that work with the destitute or homeless. Perhaps, more radically, recognising that many of our buildings are under-used at this time, are there ways in which they could be used to support community well-being initiatives, food kitchens or homeless shelters during the winter months?

It is time for us to move from considering how our churches can survive to considering how we can pour ourselves out in love for our communities, and particularly those people and situations where we will see a rapidly deteriorating personal context. Jesus came that we might have life in all its fulness, not for our own benefit but for that of the world in which we live. How might you and your church be a part of that mission?

I want to finish with a poem that I have used in worship recently written by Gerard Kelly, titled: “This Grace”.

*This grace we have been given is enough.  
When the mountains set before us  
Won't move by faith  
Until by faith we start to climb,  
It is enough.  
When our cry for heaven's miracles  
Rings hollow,  
Like a doorbell howling through an empty house,  
It is enough.*

*When from our waiting rooms of weakness  
We say yes  
To pressing on,  
It is enough.  
When we have reached the end of our energies  
And face the end of ourselves  
But can't yet see the end of our task,  
It is enough.*

*Enough  
To know that you have loved us.  
Enough  
That we are called before all time.*

*Enough  
That every fingerprint is valued.  
Enough  
That you remember every name.*

*So we will embrace this grace  
And turn our hearts to face grace.  
Loosening the locks  
On our personal space,  
We'll make each home a place of grace.  
We'll drink from your wells  
'til we're wasted on grace;  
We'll speak out your words  
'til our tongues taste of grace.  
And we'll live to love your laws  
Until our lives are laced with grace.*

*Down dark and dingy alleys  
We will chase grace.  
We will hold as something precious every trace of grace.  
We will celebrate and consecrate this grace,  
Because this grace we have been given  
Is enough.<sup>1</sup>*

Every Blessing,

Rev Tim

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<sup>1</sup> Gerard Kelly, Spoken Worship, Zondervan, 2007, P. 121- 122.