

A few days ago, I had the joy of going to the Fitz museum for the first time in nearly eighteen months. I visited with my friend Anna, and we were keen to go to the impressionist room, amongst other exhibitions – the room with those gorgeous Monet tree- and sea-scapes.

I used to visit this room every couple of weeks or so as a postgrad student. At times, which are not often, when my eyesight was particularly bad, seeing paintings that made a masterpiece of blurred lines and blended colours really helped. Without glasses my natural way of seeing the world is very much like a Monet painting – and to visit art that reminded me that it's not always a problem, but that it actually can be a beautiful thing, to see the world this way helped me to know that the way that I am made, and even the weaknesses in the way that I am made, can be good at creating beautiful things.

We, each with our own gifts and strengths, and *even* our weaknesses, can create and make beautiful things. It might not be a Monet painting – but I believe that we can each create beautiful and good things (friendships, places, memories, medicines, inventions, organisations, artworks, and so on) that make the world a better place; that enrich lives and communities; that sing of God's love.

And this is where our Bible reading ends! It says:

we are God's handiwork – God's masterpieces, artwork, poetry, composition – created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared for us to do.

Isn't that beautiful? By the ways that God has made us and continues to make us each day, we can create good things that tell the world about the love of God.

If that is where the reading ends, where does it begin?

It begins with grace. It begins with grace, because we are not the first creators – we can create, but we are also created, and this is the gift of God. It is not by our own work or strength that we are here, but through the gift and grace of God – the 'charis' of God, to use the Greek word that Nick shared in the 11am service last week.

It's one of my favourite Greek words, charis, and it is the word we often translate 'grace' – it means grace, gift, favour; something freely given; a gift given not because the one receiving it has earned it, but given out of favour, mercy, love. It's a word used through the New Testament to talk about all the ways that God acts towards people and world in a such a way as to give them life, even when they have not earned it – life to the full; life that puts to death all that is bad and brings to life all that is truly good; life that includes all people. Grace is the free gift of God to people, given through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Near the beginning of our reading we heard this:

because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in sin—it is by grace you have been saved.

We are created, transformed, and kept going by grace given through Jesus – and this daily makes us God’s artwork – able to make beautiful things that tell the world about God’s love.

Nick also last week introduced us to a second Greek word – eucharisteō, another of my favourites. It means ‘I give thanks’, and it’s where our word ‘Eucharist’ comes from, the word that names our act of sharing bread and wine, of remembering and being joined to the grace of Christ and all that this means for us, and of giving thanks for it.

Eucharisteo. Eucharist. Can you hear in the middle of these words our word for ‘grace’?

Charis is hidden at the heart of eucharisteō: grace inspires us to thankfulness. Freely we have received; in response we lift up our hearts in thankfulness and praise.

We lift up our hearts, and we lift up our hands and all that we hold in them, as an act of thankfulness to God – and God takes what we hold in our hands, all that we are and choose to offer, with all our strengths, loves, gifts, weaknesses; and works through it all in a way that makes beautiful things. Grace inspires us to thanksgiving, which opens the way for grace bring life through and to every part of our lives.

As I finish, I’ll return to where I started, in the Fitz with the Monet paintings. These paintings remind me that when I choose to offer to God my whole life – my weaknesses as well as my strengths, my sorrows and my joys – choosing to offer it all with thanks – God takes that offering and breathes new life into it. When I choose to offer my life with thanksgiving, I am able to tell stories about how God’s grace has kept me going, made me stronger, taught me how to encourage and lift others up, helped me to see that God increases our joy and makes even our weaknesses, in Christ, to be our strengths. All of these stories speak of the love of God.

By grace God transforms all that we are and all that we have and all that we have experienced, allowing every part of us to become God’s artwork, able to make beautiful things that tell the world about God’s love.

Now this morning, we were each invited to bring something – an object, a word, a picture, anything – that symbolises thankfulness to us, particularly from this last, difficult year.

When I have finished speaking, we are going to sing our next song – and following our next song, we will have the opportunity to share with each other the things that we have brought, by coming up to the mic and saying briefly what you’ve brought and why it symbolises thankfulness to you. Have a think during the next song about whether you’d like to share with us what you’ve brought with you.

This will be our way of offering to God our thanks and praise, even our thanks in the midst of the difficulty of this last year or so, for all that God’s given to create and keep us going, in such a way that still sings of God’s love. Amen.