

One of the most miserable roads it's ever been my misfortune to drive along is the North Circular in London. It's grey and industrial and boring. Not the sort of place you expect to see parables from God. But I saw one there. As I was driving along. A real-life parable from God.

I used to have to drive from Ealing, round the North Circular to Wembley. And the journey involved going past a series of superstores: Chinese supermarkets, furniture warehouses, Office World, and so on. On one stretch of the road there were several big leather furniture stores, all leather sofas and armchairs.

The first I had to go past was **World of Leather**. I'd drive a bit further, and a few hundred yards later, I'd pass **Kingdom of Leather**. And in between World of Leather and Kingdom of Leather there was a big concrete wall with a single word painted on it: **GRACE**. I'm not sure why it was there, but I think the building used to belong to the Grace food company, who imported sauces from the Caribbean.

So there was me, driving from World of Leather to Kingdom of Leather, past this big painted word: Grace. And it suddenly hit me that here was a perfect parable of the Christian life: a journey along a road. A road where we pass from the World to the Kingdom via Grace.

In our reading, the apostle Paul says: 'The *grace* of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly.' But what does Paul mean by *grace*? I want to try to unpack that, with reference to my journey from the World, to the Kingdom, via Grace. Because that's the journey at the heart of the Christian faith. And if we don't understand that journey, we won't get far in our Christian lives. So I want to look briefly at each of the parts of the journey: World, Kingdom, Grace.

Firstly, the World. There's been a lot of misunderstanding about this word, 'the World'. The Bible says we're not to be conformed to this world, and we need to give up worldly ways, and worldly wisdom, and worldly lifestyles. That being a Christian is about putting the World behind us. That's all true. The problem is that some people think this means the material world around us. Trees, hills, streets, houses, clothes, books, phones... All the solid, material things of the earth.

And that's why some Christians have assumed Christianity is about trying to rise above the things of the earth, and our physical bodies. Some Christians through history have believed that in neglecting their bodies, or even punishing them, they're becoming more spiritual.

The problem is, that's not what St Paul means when he talks about 'the world' and being worldly. He couldn't possibly have meant that. Paul knew the Genesis account of God creating the earth and human bodies. There God says that his creation of humans with material bodies was 'very good'. The Christian understanding of the human body is that it's a good thing. Matter matters!

So what does Paul mean when he talks about not being conformed to 'the world'? Well, Paul's talking about a whole mindset in opposition to God. An attitude that wants to leave God out of the picture, going against God's way and choosing our own way.

When Paul talks about the world, he means wrong attitudes, and wrong actions. I want to do right, but so often I do wrong. Things I know I shouldn't do, but I can't help myself. Partly, it's that I'm affected by other people's wrong actions. If somebody else is violent, I get hurt. If somebody else pollutes the earth, my children are harmed. What Paul calls the World is the spoiling of how things ought to be. It's the breaking of relationships, with other people and with God.

When the Bible talks about the world, it means everything in creation that's contrary to God's purposes. Leaving God out of the picture. So we're to journey from the World, to the Kingdom. And Kingdom means the kingship or rule of God. To live in the Kingdom of God means to experience a restoration of how things are meant to be. With each other, in relationship with the planet, and in relationship with God.

But the journey from the World to the Kingdom has to pass through Grace. And what does Grace look like? It looks like the way Jesus responds to the dodgy people in his society that others condemned. For example, the woman taken in adultery. Everybody else was condemning her. But Jesus showed her love, and invited her back into relationship.

And that's the way God deals with us. God doesn't condemn us. He invites us back into wholeness. He invites us to enter his kingdom and be freed from damaging patterns of behaviour. Grace means love and acceptance to people who don't deserve it. Ultimately, Jesus shows the Grace of God by dying for you and me. The consequence of going the world's way is the unravelling of faith and hope and love.

But Jesus's own journey moves beyond death to new life, to resurrection. And he offers to take us with him. He wants to take each of us on that North Circular journey, from the World, to the Kingdom, via his Grace.

There's an invitation for each one of us this morning to go on that journey. And the invitation to you will be different, depending on your own life journey. It might be an invitation to find faith for the first time, or to go deeper in faith, or to apply your faith in new ways.

Whatever the details of that look like for you or me personally, this remains true for everybody. God's big invitation is to go with him on that journey: from the World, to the Kingdom, via Grace.