**Sermon**

**Grace Changes People**

God’s grace changes people. We call this process conversion. The word “conversion”, like “repentance” means simply,

 **“to turn around.”**

God’s grace turns us around.

Sometimes the movement is slow, almost imperceptible. At other times we’re spun around so fast we end up dizzy.

But in all cases, conversion, means that once we were looking in one direction, and now we’re looking in the opposite direction.

I’d like to focus on four kinds of conversion, different ways in which God’s grace changes us

They are:

* conversion to **God**,
* conversion to **Jesus**,
* conversion to the **church**,
* and - here’s a surprising one - conversion to the **world**.

But all this talk about conversion and God’s grace at work can seem a little unreal until we get down to real cases, and so I will tell you stories of two people who experienced God’s grace at work in their lives.

As you hear their stories, see if you can recognize those ways in which grace changes people: conversion to God, conversion to Christ, conversion to the church, conversion to the world.

The first story is about Hank Hayes, Hank’s life got off to an ugly start. He was raised in an atmosphere seething with hate. Hank’s dad was a **Klansman**, and not just any Klansman, but imperial wizard of the **Ku Klux Klan**.

Hank was influenced by his dad. He grew up full of hate himself. He too became a Klansman.

And so he must have appeared as a likely suspect when a black man was lynched in in a local town.

**He was eventually convicted of murder.**

The primary witness was a man who received a lenient sentence in return for his testimony, and later admitted that he had both lied and committed perjury.

The **jury** set the sentence as life without parole, but the **judge** was able to overrule the jury and sentence Hank to **death**.

The governor refused to intervene, even when somebody came forward saying that Hank was with him the night of the murder, far from the scene of the crime.

And so after Hank spent seven years on death row and exhausted all his appeals, the State of Alabama put him to death in the electric chair.

Grace came to Hank from several unexpected directions.

When he first arrived on death row, he and the guards were worried about how black inmates would react to him.

But two of the black leaders escorted him around.

**“The state’s trying to kill us all,”** said one of them,

**“We haven’t got time to hate.”**

During his death row stay, Hank was adopted by an English parish.

He grew to love them, and they him. As a result, he became interested in Christianity.

After considerable reflection, he decided to become an Episcopalian. He hesitated because he was afraid that God would reject him because of his Klan background but, after a program of preparation where Hank showed himself to be an outstanding student, the Bishop of Alabama confirmed him there on death row.

Hank’s **conversion** was honest and real.

Grace was real in his life, and it was real at the moment of his death.

When the final day came, and they strapped him into the electric chair, the warden asked him if he had any last words.

Hank smiled and spoke a word of grace.

**“I love you”** is what he said, first to his executioners, then to the victim’s family and his friends in the viewing room.

Once a Klansman full of hate, Hank had changed. Grace had transformed him.

Was Hank Hayes converted to God and to Christ? Was he converted to the church, the community of Christ? Was he converted to the world, a world full of black and white prisoners, chaplains, and executioners? The answer in every instance is yes.

Hank Hayes was once a nasty customer,

someone **many** people found it easy to dismiss.

So too was the other person I want to talk about:

a man called **Matthew**.

Matthew’s job was collecting tolls on such things as the transportation of goods.

Matthew worked in an office in the commercial district.

People in general despised him and had their reasons for it.

He was seen as a collaborator, a stooge for the **Roman Empire** that dominated the Holy Land.

He was a living reminder to his neighbours of their heavy tax burden:

Jews were forced to pay both civil and religious taxes. Worst of all, it was widely known that many in Matthew’s position were out-and-out cheats.

In both the popular mind and in religious writings they were lumped together with thieves, murderers, and other wholesale sinners. Tax collection appeared on the lists of despised occupations that no practicing Jew should follow.

**People like Matthew were regarded as lost souls.**

Then one day, as Matthew is working away in his office, grace enters his life in the person of Jesus.

Jesus doesn’t ignore or condemn him, as most people did.

What Jesus does is **invite him.**

**“Follow me,”** is what Jesus says. Matthew is astounded, yet he leaves the tax office behind and follows Jesus, hardly stopping to lock the door behind him.

Unaware of what he’s getting himself into, Matthew follows Jesus, and he experiences GRACE.

His conversion begins as he turns his back on sordid rip-offs and follows someone who gives him all he needs without cost.

Matthew follows Jesus - **and follows him - and follows him.**

He walks with him along dusty roads, and, however unfaithfully, through the events of Holy Week.

Yet **still** Jesus calls, and **still** Matthew follows.

Grace remains in the air, even stronger than before.

Matthew becomes a witness to the resurrection.

He becomes responsible for the book that bears his name, the **Gospel according to St Matthew.**

It’s been said that of the four Gospels, this one has been the most influential throughout the Church’s history.

**Cheat. Collaborator. Greedy. Shameful** is how people saw Matthew as he took in money dishonestly, unjustly, there in his little office.

But one day grace knocked on the door, and he was converted, turned around.

The change was manifold.

* Converted to **God**, the Lord of mercy.
* Converted to **Jesus**, who loves the unworthy.
* Converted to the **church** - those early Christians.
* And even converted **to the world**, for Matthew, the sometime cheat, whose heart was once as hard as silver coins, records **that** famous Jesus story where the King on judgment day announces:

**“Whatever you did to the little people, you did to me.”**

Death row in Alabama.

The office of a dishonest collaborator.

Unlikely places for scenes of grace.

But grace happens **there** to people like Hank Hayes and that man named Matthew.

 If grace touches characters like them, can the rest of us be immune?

Perhaps we should ask how is grace appearing in our lives?

In what ways are **we** being turned around?

Do we look for grace to appear to us again and again in strange and funny ways.

And do we give thanks whenever grace breaks into our life.

**Let’s close with this story.**

Herbert Gee, a Christian author in Yorkshire, told about attending a funeral of an old man named Thomas who had outlived his friends.  Gee was concerned that there might be no one at the graveside, so he went.

But he found another man at the graveside - a soldier wearing a raincoat with no rank insignia.  When the ceremony was concluded, the soldier moved to the open grave, came to attention, **and gave a salute fit for a king.**

When the soldier moved away from the grave, Gee saw that he was a brigadier.  The brigadier said:

**"You will perhaps be wondering what I am doing here.**

**Years ago, Thomas was my Sunday school teacher.**

**I was a wild kid, and a challenge for him.**

**He never knew what he did for me,**

**but I owe everything I am or will be to Thomas.**

**And today I have come to salute him at the end."**

Here's the point.  Never lose heart.  Never count the harvest by what we can see.

Let’s Pray that the Lord of the harvest will send labourers into the harvest - and that he will bless the harvest.

Then serve faithfully with the assurance that, when we do our part, God will most assuredly take it from there.