

AUGUST 2018

Dear Friends,

'Amazing Grace'

On 23rd June twelve boys and their football coach went missing in northern Thailand. They failed to return from their training session. Parents and friends went in search of them, and when they found their bicycles and kit outside the nearby Tham Luang cave complex, the fourth largest in the country, they raised the alarm.

The rescue operation which followed attracted the attention of millions of people around the world. Everyone willed it to succeed, but for days no-one knew whether the boys were alive, and even when they were discovered on 2nd July by British divers Rick Stanton and John Volanthen, 2.5 miles into the cave, the question still remained as to how they could be brought out safely. They could not stay where they were, waiting until the water levels had subsided, because the monsoon rains were upon them. Water levels were rising and oxygen in the cave had fallen to a dangerously low level. The only option was to take them out. The journey was difficult even for experienced divers – swimming through tunnels in dark, murky water, and removing air tanks at various points where the passageway was particularly narrow. Enabling undernourished children to do it, many of whom could not swim, seemed hazardous in the extreme. But somehow it was managed!

All thirteen were brought out safely. The selfless courage and commitment of the divers involved (one tragically lost his life) was deeply moving. The boys and their coach should never have gone into the cave. They knew how dangerous it could be at that time of year and that they had acted foolishly. But the divers never dwelt on this fact. All that mattered to them was that there was a group of young people who were in danger of dying and who had to be rescued whatever the cost.

I am reminded of Jesus' famous story of the good Samaritan (Lk.10:25-37) who helps a wounded man attacked by robbers. He could have passed on by, telling himself that the man had brought his troubles upon himself by travelling alone instead of in a group. But he does not think like this; all he sees is a human being in need of his help.

Love, as Jesus proclaimed it, reflects God's 'grace' – God's unmerited goodness towards us. It is not given or received in proportion to what we deserve (eg Rom.5:7-8). The divers in the Thailand cave rescue illustrate what that love can mean in practice.

It is desperately important. Seventy years ago (on 5th July 1948) the National Health Service was begun by the then minister of health, Aneurin Bevan. It was based on the belief that good healthcare should be freely available to everyone in need without distinction; it was an institutional expression of grace which many still appreciate and treasure. But it faces enormous challenges and is under serious threat. Whatever reforms are proposed by our politicians, let us pray that the spirit of grace remains at the heart of our healthcare system.

Living by grace can be costly, as Thailand cave rescue reminds us. But it lies at the heart of the God we know in Jesus, who sends his blessings on all, whether or not we deserve it (Matt.5:44b), and it should lie at the heart of all our lives.

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