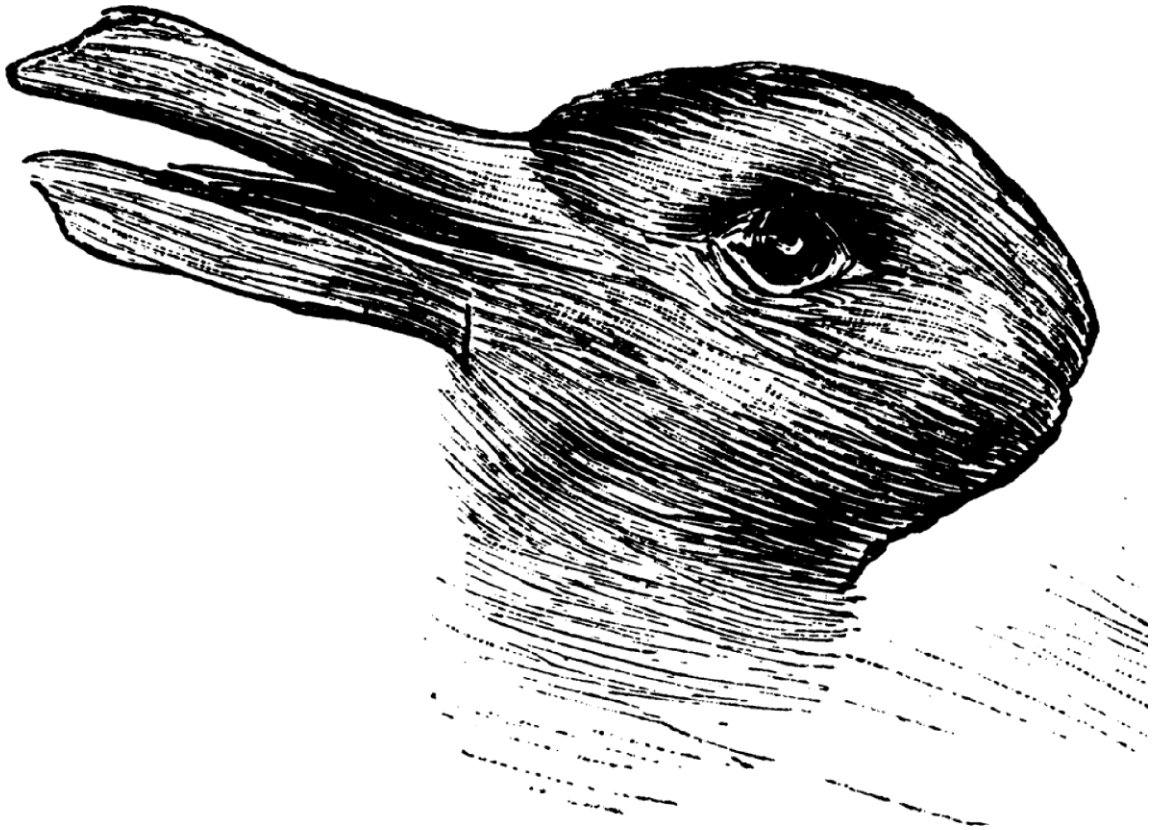


Sunday 3rd January: John 1:10-18 – ‘Grace upon grace’

When you look at the world today, what do you see?

In many ways it reminds me of this famous illusion – is it a duck or a rabbit?



It's the same picture, but it depends how you choose to see it. And the reality is that it's **both** – it's a duck *and* a rabbit, at the same time. Neither is more or less true than the other.

This is quite a good analogy for how we approach the world at present. When you look at the world today, what do you see?

From one perspective, we can't escape a dark and difficult picture. A picture of pain and predicaments, of uncertainty and unease, of restrictions and risks. A world we're not that happy about, and probably not overly confident of changing in the near future.

That is a true assessment of the current situation. But look at the same picture and there's another, equally true story – one of courage and self-sacrifice, one of neighbourliness and servant-hearted heroes, one of mutual support and quiet strength in the midst of severe challenges. One which has things to celebrate as well as mourn, to be thankful for as well as to lament.

Both of these perspectives are true. The picture is *both* – and we begin 2021 holding both together.

The same is true when we think of our faith. Or when we think about our church communities. 2020 was nothing short of a revolution, when what had previously been a fringe way of imagining Christian community became mainstream. Look at the picture, and what do you see?

Has the church shut for large parts of the year or has it grown enormously, and gone into the heart of more homes than for generations? Is our influence reduced or vastly increased? To push the picture analogy probably further than I should, has it ducked out of view, or multiplied like rabbits?

What do you see?

As we begin this New Year, let's reflect that this mixed picture was ever thus. It's nothing new. Much as we celebrate the joy of Christmas, when Jesus grew up he had the same polarising effect – he was a controversial rabbi, and whenever people met him, indeed whenever they still meet him today, Jesus poses the same question – when you look at Jesus, what do you see?

Jesus has always divided opinion. As St John shares honestly in our passage for today, he was rejected by many – even his own did not receive him. But others looked at the same person and saw something different. They recognised Jesus for who he was, and joyfully received him. As a result they were granted this wonderful privilege of becoming children of God. And so, while still surrounded by those who thought differently, these people can cry out 'we have seen his glory'.

When you look at Jesus, what do you see? Which Jesus will journey with you through this coming year?

Today I want to share something which I want to suggest is a word for all of us as we begin 2021: it's verse 16 of today's passage in the NRSV version: **'From his fullness we have all received grace upon grace.'**

Grace upon grace. This is the pattern of God's relationship to us. To give, and keep on giving. And to keep on giving in the toughest of times. Let's never forget that these words are written by the aged John near the end of his life, a life of challenge and persecution. And yet he can sum up the ministry and friendship of Jesus like this: grace upon grace.

Where does this grace come from? From Jesus' fullness. Not ours, or anything we can manufacture. Jesus' fullness is what carries us through the storm. His tank never runs dry.

And I want to suggest that despite the pain and the challenges, it remains a season of grace. And my prayer is that for 2021, it will be, as the text says, grace upon grace. My confidence to say this is not wishful thinking or blind faith, but in the sure and certain hope of our faith, which rests on the unchanging character of God. God is love, God is good, and **this God – our God – never stops giving.**

What is our calling in this? Simply to keep recognising Jesus in the midst of our lives and our situations – as the text says, to open our hands and to keep receiving Jesus – the one who offers grace upon grace. May this grace be ours now, and throughout 2021. Amen.

As we respond, we're going to sing a lovely modern version of the classic carol 'O come all ye faithful'. I chose it for the last two choruses, and may it be your prayer for this year as it is mine: 'We'll give him all the glory – for he alone is worthy: Christ the Lord.'