

St George's Anglican Church, Epsom
18th April 2010
The Law of Grace
(Seti Afoa)

Readings:

OT: Deut 15:7-15

NT: 2 Cor 8:1-15

Gospel: Matthew 5: 38-48

Verse: 2 Cor 8:9 "For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich."

Introduction

Not long ago, I was doing a training swim at Long Bay on the North Shore. It was before sunrise and before breakfast of the retreat I was attending at Vaughan Park. The sea was calm. On the way back from the northern end I witnessed the most glorious sight. The horizon to the east and on my left was in radiant red, the sun was jostling to push up from under the sea. With every breath I took I saw the millpond sea, stretching all the way to the brilliant morning sky and the amazing rising sun. I believed in God again.

When I reflect on that moment, I think of God's beautiful grace and His gifts to all. For the Law of Grace is the Law of Gift.

Last week Jordan Greatbatch set the scene with his fine sermon on our topic: Grace in Paul. Grace, like a seed, emerges from the ground amidst a crisis. And indeed the aspects of Grace in Paul are addressed in that framework. There is the human crisis affecting the divine-human relationship where sin and death, have come between us and God. All have sinned and fallen short of glory (Rom 3:23); and the wages of sin is death but the free gift of God is eternal life in Jesus Christ (Rom 6:23). "All" is inclusive, there is no distinction between nations or persons – we, all, came short. In Romans, Paul's rationale for salvation rules out many pathways to God, including the Law. That is because the present crisis involves sin which has remained unresolved since the Fall. The doctrine of sin in Paul excludes every remedy but grace. Paul maintains the absolute priority of Grace in solving the human condition.

What is this grace? How does it work? Where does it come from? And what are we to do with it?

Paul's context

When Paul speaks of Grace, he puts us in conversation with his context. Jordan rightly reminded us last week that this is the best way to understand Paul. He, Paul, is not a systematic theologian talking to us today about our misconceptions of his ideas – understand the context and we get closer to understanding Paul.

Grace according to Paul is "Gift." A gift that is one-way in movement. Normal societal conventions demand two-way love, a kind of Golden rule where honourable actions are given and received. Society, and we are members of that society and we therefore contribute to its values and perceptions, has certain rules about gift-giving, and it is reciprocal in nature. In Paul's time a person is defined by his deeds: a good person is good because he/she does good deeds. This is the only way to gain good moral worth among peers and in society. This is the context of Paul's time (Graeco-Roman setting) which was culturally and socially well immersed in the fully evolved Nichomachean ethics of Aristotle. They are not bad ethics at all, in fact Jesus himself attributes as much in Matt 7:12, Do unto others as we would have them do unto us. What we must realise is that the art of Giving and Receiving was well defined in Paul's time.

Last week Jordan used the example of Philo of Alexandria to demonstrate the differences in views on Grace between Paul and Philo. This week I will use another contemporary of Paul, Lucius Seneca, a Roman noble who thrived under Claudius (and perished under Nero). He wrote a seven-volume Treatise entitled 'On Benefits' (De Beneficiis). It is a self-help instructional work on the proper act of Giving and Receiving. It was written around the same time Paul was also writing many of his Epistles including Romans. Seneca refers to Giving and receiving as the interconnected bond in social relationships. The act of giving and receiving is reciprocal and it binds giver and receiver to more mutual acts of exchange in the future. It is based on the premise that benefits/gifts are to be returned. Seneca uses the example of a ball game to illustrate how the exchange of gifts and graces should be kept in play from hand to hand and between people. The wheel of reciprocity hence is driven by obligation. The receiver of a gift is under obligation to return the favour in an appropriate way and its return acknowledges that a relationship exists between giver and receiver. Seneca refers to this as the exchange of obligations. The receiving of the gift is equally important and more so than the giving. In this cycle ingratitude is a "vice" because it stops the flow of benefits. Seneca writes, "He who receives a gift with gratitude pays his first payment" (Ben. 2.21.6). He considers gratitude as the highest of duties. Gratitude plays such a significant role in the ethos of Paul's time that the certainty of it is sought in the transaction, "One is supposed to help not the poor but the good, not so much as to avoid serving the wicked, but because one can only expect the recompense of charis (grace/gift) from good men." Satisfaction in the act of giving is realised in the gratitude of the receiver. This is the reason why "worth" played a significant role in Gift exchange in the Paul's time because if you are exchanging gifts and graces with someone who cannot return the favour then the ball is dropped and the flow of benefits ceases. We can also begin to understand Paul's defiant deconstruction of the "honour culture" (addressing shame and honour issues in his epistles) that permeated Graeco-Roman society of his time. Aristotle (4th century BC) and many others down to Seneca were at pains to illustrate this point of worth. And indeed it was also Philo's view that divine gifts, God's gifts and calling, are given to people of worth. Philo traces the value in recipients of God's grace in the OT such as Noah, Abraham and others. Philo points to the meanings of names as the give-away sign of worth.

Grace re-defined

Paul uses the Greek vernacular to talk about gift. This is the same language that is used by Seneca. There are a variety of terms in the Greek that carry interconnected meaning for gift: *charis* means grace, favour or gift; *dorea* is gift; *didomi* means to give; *charizomai* refers to give or forgive; *charismata* is gifts of grace.

Being fully aware and well versed with the niceties of his day Paul sets out to redefine Grace. Grace is love that seeks you out when you have nothing to give in return. Grace is not reciprocal. It is one-way love. It has nothing to do with its receiver's characteristics. In Paul's theology grace is the prime directive of God to love the world in no correlation to the world's fitness to be loved. In fact it isn't fit to be loved. And in terms of our Christian theology, God loves the world in a kind of reverse relationship to its moral unfitness – while we were yet sinners Christ died for us. Meaning while we were enemies of God he gives of Himself for us. When a person works an eight-hour day and receives a fair day's pay for his time that is a wage. When a person competes and wins in a race and receives a trophy for his performance - that is a prize. When a person receives appropriate recognition for long service or high achievement - that is an award. But when a person is not capable of earning a wage, can win no prize, and deserves no award yet receives such a gift anyway - that is a good picture of God's beautiful free unmerited grace. In a way Grace is irrational because it reaches out to the specifically undeserving person. God's one-way love is a love that acts independent of all response to it. Grace is given irrespective of response. It is dispensed regardless of gratitude. God is playing ball all by himself and He invites us to join him in the ball game. When we respond in this way, the first crisis is resolved. The divine-human relationship is restored.

You see, there is nothing we can do to make God love us less. No amount of sin, or rebellion or hatred and even murder can deter the love of God from you and me. Where sin increases grace abounds even more (Rom 5:20). It is like the Plumbers motto: There is no place too deep, too dark or too dirty for us to handle. God bless the plumbers! (... and Electricians for they bring us light; and Accountants for they tell us how much we owe). There is nothing we can do to make God love us less. And it works the other way. There is nothing we can do to make God love us more. God loves us as much as an infinite God can love us. Grace, divine grace that is, is a humiliation for the self and ego because I want to feel I've done something to accomplish being right with God. Certainly that is the way it is with human relationships, we can only be in someone's good grace if we have earned it by gift or favour or deed.

Human-human crisis

Now Paul spends the first half of Romans addressing the divine-human crisis. He finds the solution in Grace. He then addresses the human-human crisis. The solution is the same, it is by grace. The crisis exists in the very congregations and churches Paul is addressing. Like us here, we come from diverse backgrounds – social, cultural, economic and intellectual. The need for grace abounds where there are such differences among us. The crisis in human-human relationships is the result of the absence of grace. Our Gospel reading brings this

sharply into focus where we are exhorted to abandon the two-way love of reciprocity. For the disciple of Christ there is something much more exciting and challenging. It is the “extra-mile” approach. You see, “Doing unto others as we would have them do unto us” defeats the purpose of Grace. In the context of the Christian community the Golden rule is not that exceptional. It is a measured law. Jesus says the rule is the Law and the Prophets. The nature of the Law, and therefore its limitations, exacts just enough measure to avert a crisis or pay recompense (for example, an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth). The Golden rule is a measure for measure. In its purest form it says I should love you to the extent you love me, not more and not less. If you invite me to dinner I must invite you back. When you buy me a cup of coffee it is my shout next time. This is the Law of reciprocity. It is driven by obligation. Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount prescribes outside the boundaries of reciprocity. He says, “If anyone wants your tunic give him your coat as well. If anyone presses you for service for one mile go an extra mile” (Matt 5: 39-42). For if we love those who love us how are we then different to the world? These verses are marked by an overflowing rejection of the common courtesy norm. To live in Christian commensality (Fellowship at Table, the act or practice of eating at the same table) is to break through the law of reciprocity because it limits our expressions of grace and love. Grace has no ceiling. It has no floor and no boundaries. You see the thing with this grace is – the very nature of Grace that we have received from God for ourselves, is the very same Grace that we are to exercise between ourselves. It is free, unreasonable, irrational grace, one-way, forgiving, long-suffering and does not seek its own good. The free gift of God is the rule of the Game of grace. In doing so, the second crisis is resolved. The human-human relationship is restored.

Cost of Grace

Grace has nothing to do with the receiver, in Pauline terminology, grace has everything to do with the giver. Grace is freely given. But it is not free is it? It is free to the receiver but it is not exactly free. In accounting terms Grace is a liability, a cost that someone has to pay. When you receive something for free it means someone else has met the cost. In the movie the Last Emperor, the young anointed last Emperor of China lives a magical life of luxury with servants at his command. He was asked, “What happens when you do wrong?” He replied, “When I do wrong, someone else is punished.” To demonstrate, he breaks a jar, and one of the servants is beaten. In Paul’s theology, Jesus has reversed this ancient pattern: when the servants erred, the King was punished. Grace is free only because the giver himself has borne the cost. God gave up his Son rather than give up on humanity. In the economy of undeserved Grace ... a murderer cannot simply walk free. Anticipating the objection Paul stresses that a price has been paid – by God himself.

Grace costs nothing for the recipients but everything for the giver. This point is aptly demonstrated in the wonderful story of Babette’s Feast (Karen Blixen, *Out of Africa*). Babette, a refugee from counter-revolutionary Paris where she lost her husband and her son, finds refuge as a housemaid in a small Danish community. The community is a sect whose members, religious and pious, are not getting on so well. After 14 years of faithful service Babette’s perpetual ticket wins the French lottery. She wins 10,000 francs. The

sisters she works for = key characters in the story - are resigned to losing her. She will indeed return to France. Babette makes one request, that she cooks for the community a 'real French' dinner. Her wish is granted but not without much trepidation and fear that the community will sin against God by eating strange and extravagant food. In a hasty conference, the sisters and the congregation agree to eat the meal, but to forego any pleasure in it, and to make no mention of the food during the entire dinner. The meal indeed is superb. Babette's extraordinary gifts as a Chef de Cuisine and a true Connoisseur, so characteristically French, breaks down their distrust and superstitions, elevating them physically and spiritually. Old wrongs are forgotten, ancient loves are rekindled, and a mystical redemption of the human spirit settles over the table — thanks to the general elation nurtured by the consumption of so many fine culinary delicacies and spirits. Babette's feast is Eucharistic in nature, albeit mundane celebration around the table shadows the "infinite gift of grace" that heals the community. The human-human crisis is resolved. At the end of the feast Babette announces she is not returning back to France for the meal had cost all her fortune. The incredible gift, so freely given, has cost nothing to the receiver, but everything to the giver. "For you know the generous act* of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich" (2 Cor 8:9).

This is the essence of God's beautiful grace, and the law by which it is given to us. It is a one-dimensional act of love – giving and emptying of ourselves for us in the same way Christ emptied himself for us. "For grace is given not because we have done good works, but in order that we may be able to do them" (Saint Augustine of Hippo). Such beautiful grace in Paul's theology demonstrates how the divine-human relationship is restored – the vertical is upright. Similarly grace is the only means by which the human-human crisis can be resolved. When that happens we have the horizontal in place. And so in the dismissal of the Church community, it is not only 'Go now to love and serve the Lord' BUT 'Go now to love and serve each other, in Grace.'

May the Grace of God the Father, of our Lord Jesus Christ and of the Holy Spirit be with us all.

AMEN.

Resources (and others):

Jewett, Robert. Romans. Minneapolis, Fortress, 2007.

Yancey, Philip. What's So Amazing About Grace. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1997.

Zahl, Paul F. Grace in Practice: A Theology of Everyday Life. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007