

Grace

I first met Grace at primary school. Every dinner time Grace would appear. Then mysteriously disappear just as quickly. I can't say we made friends.

Our next encounter was when I was a teenager. Grace was often on the telly, generally in ice skating competitions or gymnastics. And frequently, curiously, appearing under a pseudonym – Olga Korbut, Nadia Comaneci, Jayne Torville.

Grace was in my daily Bible readings too, as I progressed through the weekly readings in my well-thumbed BCP Prayer Book – especially in those mystifying passages from the epistles which I diligently read twice a week, without really understanding a word of what they meant. And obviously in church on Sunday – but I was never introduced.

As I grew up and joined church committees, Grace would pop up at the end. She had acquired a definite article by now, but was no less incomprehensible. It seemed that everyone just assumed that everyone knew Grace so well there was no need for explanation.

Eventually I changed churches. It began to dawn on me that Grace and I needed to get properly acquainted. I acquired one of those big black leather bound Bibles with comprehensive footnotes and there she was...

Grace – “unmerited favour”.

Light began to glimmer. So Christian Grace wasn't about the way God moved elegantly around heaven – it was a ‘code word’ for something much more important.

To be honest, “unmerited favour” weren't exactly words that I used regularly, but in my head they transformed into “looking at me positively, even though I hadn't earned it” – and as I substituted this definition every time I came across Grace, those enigmatic Bible passages were unlocked, and I began to see that this was personal. Because if God was “looking at *me* positively, even though I hadn't earned it”, then that must mean that God knew and cared about *me*.

A friend introduced me to another definition. God's Riches At Christ's Expense. Hmm – not only was this a neat mnemonic, it introduced another thought.

That this “looking at me positively, even though I hadn’t earned it” came at a cost. Not to me. But to God.

The Grace idea was linking God’s love and acceptance with the Cross. This added a new depth. This isn’t just some benign airy-fairy “let’s love everyone and all be happy” type of love, this is love with a hard edge. This is love about “seeing what someone is truly like and yet loving them anyway”. And wanting them back enough to die for them.

So, by now, the code-word Grace means something like “God’s sacrificially costly gift of love and acceptance, which is freely offered to each of us, though we do not deserve and could not earn it.”

And I’m thinking, no wonder St Paul and the other early Christian writers used the word ‘grace’ as an umbrella term for all that – just think how long the NT would be if all that had to be written out in full every time!

But some more serious thinking is also going on.

What if I’ve actually got all this upside down?

Here I’ve been, trying to keep God happy and get him ‘onside’ by going to church, and ‘being a good person...’

When actually God loves me because that is who God is, and he has gone to unimaginable lengths for us to be friends. What if what I really need to do is just accept God’s offer....

And then, secure in that knowledge and that love, I can begin to really live God’s way. In his love, and his strength, and his forgiveness. All of which are necessary as we try and fail, and come back to God, and try again, and again, and again.

Hello Grace..... It’s so good to know you.

And of course, once we meet Grace, once we know what Grace looks like, we see grace everywhere that Jesus was:

- The father in the story of the lost sons – looking out for the younger son, seeking reconciliation with the grumpy older son

- The landowner who paid the workers in his vineyard the daily rate for only an hour's work
- The shepherd going out to find the lost sheep
- Reinstating Peter after his denial and desertion
- In his preaching and teaching and healing and dying....
- In his resurrection and offer of new life....

Grace.

So why does all this matter?

Let's just briefly return to the passage from Ephesians that we heard earlier.

"For *by grace* you have been saved through faith, and *this is not your own doing*; it is *the gift of God – not the result of works*, so that no one may boast."

Let's just put aside the discussion about the 'saved' word for now, and assume that it means 'being in a right relationship with God' or 'becoming part of God's family' or other ways of expressing that we now belong to God.

It's pretty clear here, that first we respond to the freely offered gift of grace – and then we do stuff. Not the other way around.

We cannot earn God's love, only accept it.

So – where do we see the fruits of grace in our own lives? In the life of our churches?

Do we live out of the freedom that comes from knowing we are loved, forgiven, accepted, valued and *then* sent out

Or out of the anxiety of thinking that God's love is somehow dependent on what we do and how we behave? "Perfect performance" if you like

Let's briefly think about the life of our churches and congregations:

The pastor Tim Chester has written about what he calls 'Communities of Performance' (the 'being good' model), and 'Communities of Grace' (the 'grace' model).

He suggests that Communities of Performance might look something like this

- it's all about appearing respectable,
- actions are driven by duty,
- members find their identity in church roles/ministry, ("I'm important because I have this role or title")
- anything outside the church community is seen as threatening and 'other'
- faith and repentance are seen as one off events at 'conversion' (or confirmation??)
- 'conversion' is to respectable behaviour
- Failure – getting it wrong, breaking the rules, - is devastating,
- The focus is on allowing people to think they are sorted
- People are secretly hurting
- They don't attract broken people
- Non-members cannot imagine themselves as Christians

Whilst some of the features of Communities of Grace would be that

- People can see God's sacrificial love and acceptance (grace) in action
- People feel like they can belong
- They attract broken people
- People are loved as fellow-humans in need of grace
- Faith and repentance are seen as daily activities. (Things don't always go right, but we are secure in God's love and say sorry and try again.)
- The leaders are 'human'
- The community is messy
- Identity is in Christ – in belonging to God, in following Jesus, in knowing the presence and power of the Spirit
- Actions are driven by joy

Which of these do we feel is closer to God's idea of community?

And, I guess each of our Shirley churches and congregations are a mixture of both – but where are we heading, and how do we get there?

And because our churches and congregations are – well – **us**, the same questions to each of us as individuals

Am I seeking to earn acceptance from God through what I do and how I behave – “the being good” model if you like?

Or is my first focus on God – responding to, and then living out of, and in response to, his Grace? The “grace” model.

Or to be more realistic, since we are human and have an inbuilt propensity to mess things up, and because of this it’s painfully easy to slip from the grace path back to the performance one – which path are we *trying* to follow?

So – Grace....

God’s Riches at Christ’s Expense?

“God’s sacrificially costly gift of love and acceptance, which is freely offered to each of us, though we do not deserve and could not earn it.”

Or some other (possibly more official) definition.

Whatever.

When we truly grasp it, it turns our world upside down.

Or should that be, the right way up?

Response:

As a response this evening we’re going to spend a little while just pondering on those questions on how we see our relationship with God.

Grace is so alien to our human experience that we have to earn just about everything, that it can be really difficult to allow ourselves to open up to the possibility of God’s grace extending even to us.

So we’re going to use a short guided imaginative meditation, to help us to find a place where that might be possible.