

Reading: Romans 5 1-8 little reading, big impact

The Bishop had been invited for dinner and the parents were anxious to impress. So after they had all sat down and it was time for grace, the mother turned to little Susie.

"Please say grace Susie."

"But I don't know what to say."

"That's okay dear, just say what I said at lunch time."

So Susie intoned, "O God, I do wish the bishop wasn't coming for tea tonight."

I want to preach today on the reading from Romans. Romans 5, and its insistence that we are saved not by our efforts but by the grace of God, is a little reading that has had a massive impact. The world has been turned upside down when people have taken this reading seriously.

Martin Luther had done all he could as a monk to get himself right with God. And then one day he was reading this passage. For him this was a reconversion moment. His life was transformed. He quickly realised that a lot of what the church was doing, selling indulgences and demanding fasting and penance, was built not on God's grace but on a belief that we have to somehow earn God's love. This passage fired the Reformation.

A similar thing happened to Charles Wesley. While studying this passage in a home group in 18th century England, he wrote: "It was while studying Romans and I learnt of the unmerited grace of God, that my heart was strangely warmed."

Wesley went on to establish a movement that included the poor and the disadvantaged across the world. We know it today as the Methodist church.

C S Lewis had a similar encounter with this passage as did Karl Barth.

During a British conference on comparative religions, the notables were arguing about what unique contribution Christianity had made. Buddhism has an eight fold path, Hinduism has karma, Judaism has the covenant, Muslims have a code of law. What contribution does Christianity make? C S Lewis walked in and answered, "Oh, that's easy. It's grace."

The notion of God's love free of charge/no strings attached seems to go against the instinct of humanity. Only Christians dare to talk about God's unconditional love.

But what is grace?

Grace is best described as the "the unmerited love of God." Grace makes all the difference.

In classical music, the composer will put little notes at the top of the page. These notes add nothing to the tune but they just make the piece sound better. They are called grace notes.

The library sends me an email when my books are getting overdue. I always have overdue books because I run out of time to get them back. The period when they are overdue and when they don't mind the coming back is called a grace period.

We all experience grace in our everyday lives when something unmerited happens. I was groveling in my wallet for the right change to park at the hospital when a complete stranger come and said don't worry I'll get that for you.

When we returned from holiday in Auckland once, our friends picked us up in our car which they had washed and filled to the brim with petrol.

The man on the plane didn't want the window seat so he graciously said, "You have it, I need to sleep." And he gave me his muffin as well.

Each of these are small examples of grace, but they make life worth living. To give grace, to receive grace, this is the meaning of life.

Accompanied by her fiance a woman went to the Hyatt Hotel in downtown Boston and ordered a meal. The two poured over the menu. They were booking their wedding breakfast. They found china and silver and flower arrangements they liked. They both had very expensive tastes. They put down a deposit some 13,000 dollars.

Unfortunately when it came time to mail out the invitations the bridegroom got cold feet. "It's a big commitment," he said, "Let's leave it and think about it a bit longer."

When the bride went back to cancel the booking, the manager was very understanding but couldn't give the money back.

It seemed crazy but the more the jilted bride thought about it the more she liked the idea of having a party anyway - not a wedding one but a big blow out. Ten years before she had been homeless and now had a good job and

money. Now she had the idea of using her savings to treat the down and outs of Boston to a night on the town.

And so it was on June 1990 in the Hyatt Hotel in Boston a party was held like no party before it.

The hostess changed the menu to boneless chicken in honour of the groom and sent invitations out to the rescue shelters and homeless shelters. That night people who normally ate out of skips and scraped food off used pizza boxes sat while the waiters served them the very finest.

For one night bag ladies, drug addicts, homeless and those dying because of lack of health cover, left their circumstances behind and sipped from fine glassware, ate wedding cake and danced to the big band late into the night.

And that my friends is what grace looks like.

So how can we grow in grace?

A simple exercise can grow our openness to grace:

Sit quietly somewhere, and put your hands up.

With our hands up, ask God to fill you with grace,
with that unmerited love that he pours into our hearts.

When an ungracious thought or the memory of someone being ungracious to you fills your head, turn your hands down,
and give it to God.

Once you have fully given it to God

turn up your our hands to receive God's grace again.

Hands up to receive,

hands down to give back to God.

Simple.