

The Gift of Grace

Christmas Day 2017

Reading: John 1:1-14

God of grace,
On this day
You give us the gift of Jesus.
Help us to receive all He has to give us.
In His name we ask it...

I wonder what gifts you have been given this Christmas. I wonder how much trouble you went to choose just the right gifts for others, to find just the right gift for that someone special this Christmas. The gifts people give say a lot about the giver. I heard of a mean father who gave his children batteries for Christmas with a note saying toys not included.

Today we gather to celebrate the greatest gift of all. The first gift that kicked off this whole gift giving thing, the gift of Jesus.

We have listened to one of the most majestic readings in all the Bible. The opening passages of John's Gospel. It's all there: the pre-existent Christ and that wonderful image of the light forever shining in the darkness and the darkness never overcoming it. You could spend a lifetime just studying this passage and many have.

Today I want to focus our thoughts on just one thing: the gifts given to us this Christmas Day. The Gospel has within it the four essential gifts from God to us. Verse 3: "What has come into being in him was life, and that life was the light of all people. Life and light..." Further down we read that this child is "full of grace and truth." Life, light, grace, and truth - these are the gifts God is giving us today.

Of these four I want to focus on just one - the gift of grace. Verse 14 says "We have seen his glory, the glory of the father's only son, full of grace and truth."

But what is grace? Grace is an unmerited gift, given to us not because we deserve it but because God wants the very best for us.

What does grace look like in our everyday lives?

Looking back Jane wondered what she was thinking, but standing at the gate one day she invited Stan to Christmas dinner. Stan had lived next door to the family for years and they all hated him. He seemed grumpy and if ever a ball or a kite went over the fence they never saw it again. The rest of the family didn't greet the news with much joy.

"You did what!?" they said, "You invited Stan-the-old-grump from next door. That will kill the Christmas spirit. Well done mum!"

The day came. It started really awkwardly but as time went on, the family began to relax. Stan as it turned out was just basically lonely. He had lost his wife many years earlier. One of the young kids got talking to him and he told them stories about growing up on the coast. It wasn't long until Stan reciprocated with an invite of his own. He started being very neighbourly taking in the wheelie bins, feeding the cat, watering the tomatoes. What started as a mistake turned into a lasting friendship.

There wasn't a family do that old Stan wasn't invited to. Within a couple of years he become a part of the family. But what came next shocked everyone. Stan died. That was no surprise. What was a big surprises was the phone call from the lawyer. "Stan," she said, "has left you everything." As it tuned he not only owned his house but had a tidy share portfolio too.

This is what grace looks like: something unmerited, more than little overwhelming and life enriching.

This year has been a year of grace in our parish too. Many have come forward both children and adults to be baptised. Alongside worship we have an estimated 22,000 visitors during the year coming for one of our ministries: to the English class or Coffee and Chat or Mainly Music or the craft group - the list goes on. Many others, including the City Council, have recognized our commitment to the community.. When we gathered this time last year we had hardly any money towards our restoration of St Peter's Church, this year we have had over one million dollars given.

C S Lewis the author of the Narnia series had a similar encounter with grace. 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.

Philip Yancey, who wrote a book entitled *What's So Amazing About Grace?* concluded "God loves people because of who God is, not because of who we are."

In the end what have we done to deserve the gifts of God, what have we done to even deserve the gift of life?

All we can do is invite the God of grace into our lives as we might a neighbour, and then we will be surprised by all the grace that follows. Just as we open our Christmas presents may we also open ourselves to receive the gift of the Holy Child, the gift of grace.

Any gift teaches us much about the giver. At Christmas we learn about the ultimate gift giver - God. God is not a \$2 dollar Shop shopper. God pours his gifts on us, not just at Christmas but every moment of our lives. God gives us that which is most precious - his very own Son, a gift which would cost Jesus everything, even his own life.

God wants us to have lives filled with, grace. This is the message of Christmas.