

### Reading: Matthew 15:21-28

The vicar received a call. “I’d like you to baptise my cat,” went the voice on the other end of the phone. “I’m sorry. It’s not our practice to baptise cats.” “Oh, that’s a shame,” continued the caller, “I was thinking of giving a million dollars to the restoration fund.” “That’s different,” said the vicar, “You didn’t tell me your cat was an Anglican!”

In our reading today, we see the openness of Jesus. He is in what we call *Lebanon*, not far from the terrible explosion that has just taken place. A Canaanite woman calls out to Jesus. He tries to ignore her, but the disciples are being driven crazy by her yelling. I like the way the Message version puts what comes next. Jesus refused, saying: “I’ve got my hands full dealing with the lost sheep of Israel.” Jesus has his heart set on ministering to Jews not Gentiles. She begs him and, in the end, he completely turns around his approach to her. He not only heals her daughter but commends her faith.

In Jesus we see radical openness. He is open to changing his mind about the whole focus of his mission. He is open to talking with a stranger. He is open to her having godly faith when none of the disciples would have been open to that possibility.

Jesus was open to new people. Important men of his day talked with – well, other important men. But Jesus embraced children. He spoke with and valued the opinion of women. He met with foreigners, he dined with sinners, he touched lepers. He was radically open.

To be open to others, to talk with them and to learn from them, this sort of openness has a special Christian name. We call it *grace*.

During a British conference on comparative religions, the notables were arguing about what unique contribution Christianity had made. Buddhism had an *eight-fold path*, Hinduism had *karma*, Judaism had *the covenant*, Muslims had *a code of law*. What contribution did 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. And we see that love at work in this Gospel.

But what is grace?

Grace is best described as the “the unmerited love of God” and 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 read them. The period when they are overdue and when they don’t mind them coming back is called a *grace period*.

We all experience grace in our everyday lives when something unmerited happens. I was grovelling in my wallet for the right change to park at the hospital when a complete stranger came 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.

In our COVID world, grace looks like kindness to a stranger in the testing queue, as we let them go first. Grace is an encouraging word, a smile, a helping hand with your toddler. The giving and receiving of grace makes life worth living. To give grace, to receive grace, this is the meaning of life.

Accompanied by her fiancé, 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. 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, she 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, that in 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 a 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.

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 your 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 hands to receive God's grace again.

Hands up to receive, hands down to give back to God.

Simple. - Repeat.

The goal of the Christian life is to grow more and more in grace like Jesus.

But we still don't baptise cats!