

This morning we conclude our short series looking at getting to know Jesus better. We have already looked at the joy and peace of Jesus and last week Sue spoke of the love of Jesus; the kind of radical and sacrificial love that is pure, unconditional and freely available to all. A gift that we are invited to accept and respond to. This morning I am going to talk about the grace of Jesus which like his love is freely offered and in terms of our faith I think grace can be best defined as the free and unmerited favour shown to us by God.

For years I struggled with the idea that God's grace was an abstract concept or some physical thing we could grasp. But in time I realized that God's grace is a person. Jesus Christ is God's grace personified. Jesus may not have said "I love you" but those who met him went away knowing they were dearly loved. Didn't John go around for the rest of his life telling people "I'm the disciple Jesus loves?" And as Sue said last week – so are we.

To know his love is to know his grace. They are inseparable. God is gracious because God is love. Jesus came to reveal the grace of a loving God who loves us like a father. That in a nut shell is what grace is all about. It is God's freely offered love to us through the life death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Indeed, CS Lewis once proclaimed that grace was Christianity's unique contribution amongst world religions.

How often do we hear the phrase 'there but for the grace of God'? We say grace before meals and of course we say the prayer called The Grace at the end of many services. St Paul, in every single one of his letters includes the grace of Jesus in his greetings and yet the surprising thing is that Jesus hardly spoke the word grace and yet he talked about it so often in his parables; the most notable one being the prodigal son. I'm sure we all know the story well and the grace shown by the father towards the returning younger dissolute son and the total lack of grace shown by the elder son towards both his brother and father trumpets the wonder of grace.

In fact you could say; grace is amazing – we sang Amazing grace:

Amazing grace! How sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me. I was lost, but now I'm found.

John Newton wrote those words in relation to his time engaged in the slavery trade; they could easily have been said by the returning younger son.

In 1997 Philip Yancy wrote a bestselling book entitled "What's so amazing about grace? He took over 300 pages to answer that question I'd like to answer by telling two short stories.

Why is grace so amazing?

We talk about grace in many different contexts; the graceful movement of a ballet dancer; the period of grace given before payment of a bill is due. We talk of the graceful way a sportsman or team accepts defeat or the grudging person who shows bad grace. The investigations surrounding historical child abuse has led to a number of celebrities falling from grace and yet, somehow, in many of these instances there is a danger that the amazing uniqueness of Jesus' grace will be lost.

Here's the first of my two stories through which I hope you will also realize why the grace of Jesus is so amazing.

1. Les Miserables

Of all the films, plays and musicals I have seen, the one I keep on returning to is Les Miserables. It tells the story of Jean Valjean, sentenced to hard labour in Napoleonic France for stealing a loaf of bread for his starving sister and her child. 19 years later he is paroled as a hardened and tough convict despised and hated by his jailer Javert who tells Valjean parole is too good for him and promises he will always seek him out wherever he goes because – once a thief always a thief.

Like all ex felons in those days Valjean is treated as a leper, an outcast from all forms of society. For days on end his pleas for shelter and food fall on deaf ears until he meets a kindly bishop who much to the disgust of his servants is invited to join them for dinner and offered the most comfortable bed to sleep in. Valjean does not see kindness only an opportunity and makes off in the middle of the night with a sackfull of silver stolen from the house.

Valjean is brought back to the Bishop's house with the silver the next morning having been arrested by police. Expecting praise for capturing a thief and returning his stolen silver the police are dumbfounded when the Bishop tells them instead that Valjean isn't a thief; the silver was in fact his gift to Valjean. Indeed he was very thankful to the police for bringing Valjean back because he had forgotten to take the most valuable silver in the house and produces two solid silver candlesticks and gives them to Valjean.

After the police leave the Bishop says to Valjean "Do not forget to use the money the silver will bring to make you an honest man". Valjean promises and indeed does become a kindly benefactor to the poor and disadvantaged.

Now isn't that amazing! The grace shown by the Bishop is freely offered and totally unmerited. And that's not the end of the story as far as Valjean is concerned. Whilst he is transformed by the grace shown to him, Javert, now a state detective stalks Valjean only to have him slip through his grasp on a number of occasions until one day the tables are completely turned upside down when events lead to Valjean intervening as Javert is about to be killed. He saves Javert's life in an act of grace which Javert is unable to understand or even accept. Finding himself tormented by this act which goes against every instinct and belief he holds dear he commits suicide rather than accept there is such a thing as forgiveness and grace.

2. The Art collection

One of the speakers I've most enjoyed listening to is Mike Breen. He tells the story of an old man whose greatest joy in life is his son. They spend time together often admiring what had become the greatest art collection in the world; each evening after enjoying dinner together they would wander around their palatial house discussing the merits of each work of art.

One day the son was called up to fight in the war and tragically was killed. The old man was bereft and sat alone each evening at dinner remembering which pieces of art the son liked best. Then there was a knock at the door and a soldier with a picture under his arm stood there.

He said to the old man that you don't know me but your son saved my life; when I was all but spent he carried me out of the line of fire to safety only to be killed by a sniper with a single bullet through the

heart. He apologized and said, I'm not much of an artist but I wanted you to have this picture of your son I've painted from memory. Please accept it.

By any standards, it was a very poor painting but the old man could sense something of a likeness and hung it in pride of place in the dining room. Some years later the old man died and his art collection came up for auction. The great the good and the glitterati all assembled eagerly anticipating which of the fabulous works of art they might add to their own collections.

The auctioneer banged his gavel down for quiet and the first lot was put on the easel and there was an audible gasp of astonishment around the room when it was realized that the auction was going to start with a Titan, Rembrandt, Turner or Picasso but the painting of the son given by the soldier.

Amidst increasing mutterings from those seated the auctioneer asked "who will start me at £100; when no one responded he said "who will start me at £50" and other than mutterings of come on let's get to the good stuff, there was no response; £20 no taker; £10 no taker; £5 said the auctioneer and one hand rose from the doorway right at the back of the room.

It was the gardener who had worked at the old man's house and remembered the son. I can afford £5, he thought and I do remember the son.

Going once, going twice and the auctioneer banged his gavel down - sold to the man in the door. Then to everyone's surprise he got up and said "that concludes the auction. I'm sorry but in his will the old man stipulated that whoever bought the picture of the son, gets it all"

Amazing. Whoever gets the son gets it all. Do you get Jesus?

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Do you get his grace?

Among the last words Jesus spoke on the cross before he died were "Father forgive them, they know not what they do". The Bishop forgave Valjean by an act of grace; Valjean forgave Jalvert and saved his life through an act of grace. Jesus sought the forgiveness of his persecutors and executioners through an act of grace.

That is why grace is so amazing.