

## REJOICING IN GRACE

Eucharist, 13<sup>th</sup> March 2016

**Texts:** Isaiah 43, 16 – 21; Philippians 3, 4b – 14 & John 12, 1 – 8.

### Introduction

Two thousand years on, and we still remember **that** dinner party at Bethany, - what a very special *Eucharist* it must have been! But, like Judas, we too might consider that Mary's anointing of Jesus' feet to be outrageously provocative, as well as being very expensive. Mary was perhaps the Sister of Martha and Lazarus, or she could well have been Mary of Magdala, one of Jesus' closest followers. This Mary may have been saving the precious Nard for her own wedding, but there was to be no marriage; - although she was clearly devoted to Jesus.

Whilst Mary's generous impulse amazed those present, it was graciously accepted by Jesus, who said, "*let her alone, let her keep what she has for my burial*". So what is grace? – There are so many modern connotations, including beauty, charm and approval. But what is God's grace? – The Oxford English Dictionary states that grace is, - *the unmerited favour of God* – generosity of spirit that cannot be earned, yet is transformative when we accept it;<sup>1</sup> – to recognise God's grace in our lives. - Can **we** indeed be agents of God's grace, in both word and deed?

### Charis

In the Greek New Testament, *Charis* is normally translated as *grace*, - God's graciousness towards humankind. In Hebrew it is *hēn*, - God's election of His people, manifested in the Covenant; as in the Psalmists Songs of Ascents to the Temple<sup>2</sup>, and in Isaiah's prophecy of God's promise to rescue his people. Christian theology uses *grace* in a wider context, not as a thing, but as a transformation, - the deification of life, - as God's undeserved gift of himself, so that we may know Him; - even to be in relationship with the Creator. Yet how can we acknowledge His grace, unless it is implanted in us, as an affinity, an aptitude for grace? And His gracious relationship with us, - as sinners must involve forgiveness.

There are two aspects of God's grace: the gift of sanctification, - the Roman and Orthodox view; and justification by faith, favoured by Protestant tradition. As a layperson I am already in deep theological waters. However, Archbishop Michael Ramsey wrote: *To be a theologian is to be exposed to the vision of heaven and the tragedies of mankind*. Then surely we must all aspire to be theologians, if we are to share God's grace!

### All Creatures Great and Small

Do you remember another grace full dinner party, - in the *James Herriot* stories? *All Creatures Great and Small*, - the adventures of a young Yorkshire vet<sup>3</sup>; - televised in the 1980s? In one episode James took his wife out to dinner, to celebrate their first wedding anniversary. Their romantic evening was perfect bliss, - the food, the wine and each other: for a few short hours they had no cares in the world. Until, - until James came to pay the bill; - he could not find his wallet, he searched everywhere with rising embarrassment.

What a sad end to their special evening! Finally James had to admit to the waiter that he could not pay the bill; whereupon, the waiter replied that the bill had already been paid, - by their generous friend Siegfried, the senior partner.

### Accepting Grace

Am I alone in being embarrassed when a young person (often a Moslem school girl) offers me her seat on the bus? I clearly look old, but I can still stand, to offer my seat to a really elderly passenger. However, it is important to accept grace, and to accept it gracefully! Giving and receiving grace is, or should be part of the commerce of polite relationships, acknowledging and responding to each other's needs; - even to loving our neighbours as ourselves; for love is the reciprocation of grace.

### Words

The Hebrew word for *speaking* is the same as *creating*, - as in the opening of John's Gospel; - *In the beginning was the Word!* However, being *grace full* does not always need words, - body language can be very significant. Jesus spoke many words of teaching and comfort. But He was also a man of action, who made things happen. He understood Mary's gesture of love, - a gesture that expressed more than any words could convey.

### God's Promise

In the reading from Isaiah we heard of God's promise to the Jews exiled in Babylon; the promise that was fulfilled when some of them returned to Jerusalem in 538 BC. Verse 18 states, - *Do not cling to events in the past, or dwell on what happened long ago. Watch for the new thing that I am going to do.* Soren Kierkegaard<sup>4</sup> said, - *Life can only be understood backwards; but it must be lived forwards.* So we should rejoice in grace, looking to the future, welcoming *serendipity*<sup>5</sup>, - unforeseen blessings and happenstances, - with the certain hope of God's generosity; by acting altruistically, - graciously for the good of others. The righteousness that Paul urged for the new Christians at Philippi; as he ran towards the finishing post of God's love: the love beyond mere words. Like the love and grace shown by Mary, when she anointed Jesus at the beginning of Passion Week, - and then, when Mary Magdalene found him in the Garden, early on Easter morning. And so, as we approach Jerusalem and the great dramas of Easter Week, let us look out for the *new thing* that God wants us to do; and try to be grace full to all those whom we meet. And may we now welcome Christ's grace, as we share His Eucharistic *Dinner Party* here, this morning.

Amen

Words ~ 930

### Notes:

1. Thomas Aquinas, 1225 – 74.
2. Psalms 5 & 124.
3. Alf White's reminiscences
4. Soren Kierkegaard, C19<sup>th</sup> Danish Theologian.
5. *Serendipity*, - making fortunate discoveries by accident, - coined by Horace Walpole, C18<sup>th</sup>.