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*Refresh*

**Winter 2005 ISSUE:  
"Amazing Grace"**

Spiritual Growth Ministries has published a newsletter twice yearly since our inception in 1981.

In the Winter of 2001 this became the **SGM Journal of Contemplative Spirituality**, *Refresh*.

Each issue works with a theme that is both relevant and stimulating of thought, prayer and discipleship. In this issue we take a look at "Amazing Grace".



**Refresh Editor Andrew Dunn**

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of Spiritual Growth Ministries Journal of Contemplative Spirituality:**

*Refresh*

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### COMMENT by Andrew Dunn

Amazing Grace! The energy of God's loving! The Word made flesh living amongst us. Could we work with a more amazing theme than this? Probably not.

It has been the inspiration of the Christian view of faith and life, hope and mission from the beginning. Many of Jesus' parables and stories along with his life, death and resurrection centre around the wonderful grace of God. "What he's doing, God is doing." says Archbishop Rowan Williams.<sup>1</sup>

John Newton, in witnessing to this decisive action in his life as a slave ship captain, wrote one of the most memorable and enduring hymns of grace, *Amazing Grace*.

*God's grace first taught my heart to fear,  
His grace my fears relieved;  
How precious did that grace appear  
The hour I first believed.*

*Through every danger, trial and snare  
I have already come;  
His grace has brought me safe thus far,  
And grace will lead me home.*<sup>2</sup>

Most eras of the last 2000 years have had their theologians of grace: St Paul in the first century, St Augustine in the 4<sup>th</sup>, Luther and Calvin in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Karl Barth and Karl Rahner in the 20<sup>th</sup> among many others.

We look back at most of them and wonder how there could be such a mix of fresh vision and understanding of grace alongside the limitations, attitudes and actions of their day. I found a stimulating sermon title on the net while looking for the source of a Luther quote: *Broken Vessels, Amazing Grace: or, Why We Can Still Sing With Luther and Other Scoundrels*.<sup>3</sup> It's because they are our brothers and sisters in the faith, because of grace, because of forgiveness, because of our own sinfulness and brokenness and because we too are people of our time.

The Luther quote I was looking for is his famous (or is it infamous?) comment to Philip Melancthon, "Sin and sin boldly! But let your trust in Christ be stronger still, and rejoice in Christ who is the victor over sin, death and the world."<sup>4</sup>

Now we don't want this issue of Refresh to be seen as encouraging our sinning but rather to see afresh how radical the notion of God's free grace is. Every age of the faith wants to limit it, contain it, control it - but no one can do that to God's burgeoning giftfulness among us.

As we encounter this lavish grace that can't be contained or controlled, the natural tendency is to find ways to limit the explosion of light that infuses every dark crevice of the psyche. Our ability to manufacture ways of doing this is remarkable. Often they express a need to earn it, work for it, deserve it and, of course, control it. We are control freaks before grace - it's too potent, too freeing, too out of left field, too risky, too challenging in its burgeoning energy of loving and recreating.

And yet how we desire it and yearn for it. Thank God Jesus came among us as grace and truth, and that in him we find grace upon grace upon grace.

Philip Yancey has served our generation well with his fresh look at grace.<sup>5</sup> What strikes me about his book is that he doesn't offer definitions of grace. He tells stories of people's discoveries and his own. Many of them push the boundaries beyond our comfort zones as they paint another brush stroke into the canvas of life. A friend said to me when I told him about this issue of Refresh, "Tell it in stories". That's what Jesus did so often. And that's because stories of experiences of grace do much more for us than words about it. It's like we have to meet grace again and again for the first time to keep grasping it.

We're also wanting to suggest that contemplative spirituality rests both comfortably in God's grace and mercy and most uncomfortably in anything that proscribes and limits understanding and application of grace in life.

Anyway, here's our offering for this issue. It goes out with our prayer that you will find rich things here that will entice you out of the safe places and into fresh discoveries of "*the unforced rhythms of grace*" (Matt 11:28. The Message).

1 Diocesan Newsletter, Easter 1995, in Rupert Shortt. *Rowan Williams - An Introduction*. DLT 2003. 60.

2 Amazing Grace by John Newton. (1725-1807) Hymns For Today's Church. Hodder 1988. No. 28, verses 2 and 3.

3 David L. Johns. Earlham School of Religion. 26.10.2001.  
[http://esr.earlham.edu/vocal\\_ministry/broken\\_vessels.html](http://esr.earlham.edu/vocal_ministry/broken_vessels.html)

4 Luther to Melancthon, no 99 (1 August 1521)

5 Philip Yancey. *What's So Amazing About Grace?* Zondervan. 1997.

## GRACE IS ...

Grace is not a *thing*, but its essential significance is simply God himself in His goodwill towards (people). The grace of God is not something separable from God, but is the personal relationship which God establishes (with people).

F. Baudraz in von Allmen's *Vocabulary of the Bible*. Lutterworth 1966. 157.

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Grace is *favour*, the *free and undeserved help* that God gives us to respond to his call to become children of God ... partakers of the divine nature and of eternal life.

Grace is *participation in the life of God*.

*Catechism of the Catholic Church*. St Pauls. 1994. 483.

.....

Grace is an outrageous concept. It is by definition a gift to the undeserving. Anything you deserve has become a fair reward: grace is unmerited favour.

*Sounds of Grace* CD. See Resources below.

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Christianity is not about learning how to live within the lines. Christianity is about the joy of colouring. The grace of God is preposterous enough to accept as beautiful a colouring that anyone else would reject as ugly. The grace of God sees beyond the scribbling to the heart of the scribbler.

Michael Yaconelli - *Dangerous Wonder*. NavPress. 1999. P124.

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Gracious Gardener,  
how wondrously you care for my soil.  
You send your waters of refreshment.  
You fertilize me with your enduring kindness.  
You keep drawing me toward your light. ...

Joyce Rupp. *Prayers to Sophia*. Innisfree Press. 2000. 62

.....

The grace of God is dangerous. It's lavish, excessive, outrageous, and scandalous. God's grace is ridiculously inclusive. Apparently God doesn't care who He loves. He is not very careful about the people He calls His friends or the people He calls His church. Exactly.

Yaconelli - op. cit. 126.

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*Charis* always demands the answer *eucharista* (that is, grace always demands the answer of gratitude). Grace and gratitude belong together like heaven and earth. Grace evokes gratitude like the voice an echo. Gratitude follows grace as thunder follows lightning. Karl Barth. *Church Dogmatics* IV/1, 41.

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Since the Spirit blows where it will, one must be on the lookout, ready to be surprised by grace. God's glory is creation and the human community fully alive - enjoying God, each other and the earth. God's grace is everywhere.

Elizabeth Dreyer. *Manifestations of Grace*. Michael Glazier Inc. 1980. 240.

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We praise God not to celebrate our own faith but to give thanks for the faith God has in us. To let ourselves look at God, and let God look back at us. And to laugh, and sing, and be delighted because God has called us his own.

Kathleen Norris. *Amazing Grace - a Vocabulary of Faith*. Riverhead Books NY. 1998. 151.

#### IS IT "TOO GOOD TO BE TRUE"? GRACE IN THE GOSPELS *by Sheila Pritchard*

"Full of grace and truth" - that's John's description of Jesus<sup>1</sup>. But how on earth did Jesus make them work together? *Grace* implies generosity, loving kindness and unconditional acceptance. But *truth* brings a shiver of anxiety as we think of the ugly stuff that is there to be revealed about us. Couldn't we have grace without the truth? Wouldn't that be nicer?

When I think about how Jesus demonstrated grace, two gospel passages immediately come to mind. One is a story Jesus told and the other is an actual encounter. One has a man as the key character, the other a woman. You've probably guessed! Yes, the prodigal son and the woman caught in adultery. If these were the only two scraps of Scripture someone found from a torn up Bible, I venture to say it would be enough! Here is the most marvellous picture of what God is like. Here is the gospel in action. Here is Jesus bringing grace and truth together and leaving the man and the woman feeling loved, freed and set on a new path.

Looking at the two stories we might be tempted to think it is too good to be true! That's the trouble with grace - it is so "over the top" that some part of us finds it hard to believe. We want to tone it down a bit and say, "God will be gracious to me if..." And that's exactly why we need grace *and* truth to be in these stories. We need Jesus to show us that the worst truth in the world doesn't impede grace. In fact grace doesn't really come into play unless there is some "undeserving truth" somewhere! If we deserved God's goodness it wouldn't be a matter of grace!

Take the prodigal son for example<sup>2</sup>. The whole point of Jesus' story is that the son had done just about everything imaginable to reject his father, waste his inheritance and live in a way that 'thumbed his nose' at everything the father would have valued. When he finally crept home humiliated and bedraggled, he probably expected rejection and was prepared to beg for a servant role if it meant food and shelter. If "creeping and begging" describe the way you sometimes approach God, get inside this story! Not a word of rebuke was uttered. The son was not told to clean himself up, shape up or promise to do better from now on. His full apology wasn't even necessary. He was instantly swept up in the arms of ecstatic love and celebrated like a prince. The *truth* of his profligate lifestyle was plain for all to see and it was met by the *grace* of a father who saw only the son he had always loved.

At this point you are either overwhelmed with the wonder of this expression of God's grace or still trying to tone it down a bit with niggling doubts like: "But it's only a *story*. Surely in real life it isn't that good." Or: "Yes but he did *repent*. Don't forget that repentance is the pre-requisite for being offered grace."<sup>3</sup> If so, hold those questions while we look at the encounter of Jesus with the woman caught in adultery.

This is real life! Real life in a society that was stringent about living a good moral life according to the law of Moses. Being law-abiding and of good moral standing are values we would affirm in our society today. We too might wish more people kept within those boundaries. Those who wanted to uphold law and morality brought (dragged?) this woman to Jesus. Please note: it wasn't her initiative! "Sexual immorality has

consequences!" they said. "If you, Jesus, are really on God's side then prove it by meting out the appropriate punishment." (Death by stoning, no less.) How were grace and truth to come together here?

Well you probably know the story as well as I do. Jesus skillfully shifted the focus from the truth of the woman's sin to the accusers' own. When they rather shamefacedly withdrew, Jesus had a chance to relate to the woman personally with grace and truth. Grace came first. "Neither do I condemn you," must have been words in the "too good to be true" category for that woman. The charge against her was accurate. She had been "caught in the act of adultery". How could she possibly not be condemned? It just didn't make sense in the world-view of devoted Judaism. And Jesus was a Jewish Rabbi. What's more, we know, even if she didn't, that Jesus did not hold back from condemning her because of his own sin. If anyone had the right to condemn Jesus did. So why didn't he? Because condemnation is the antithesis of grace. There is no room for condemnation in a love that sees to the heart - a love that sees beneath and beyond all our brokenness and shame. When love like that is expressed we call it grace.

Jesus loved this woman for who she truly was - a person of dignity and potential. For that reason he didn't fudge the truth in offering her grace. He knew that if she was to accept this love and let it transform her she had to turn away from all that had demeaned her. "Go now and leave your life of sin" conveyed so much in a few words. It told the woman that Jesus knew her history. It told her that he knew she could begin again from this point of grace and live differently. 'Sin' is one of those words that carries so much baggage that this statement of Jesus can sound like a judgemental postscript tacked on to the grace-filled encounter. I don't think so. I've come to think of sin as anything that turns us away from God's love. From that perspective Jesus was saying: "Go now and leave behind anything that would keep you from experiencing the fullness of grace."

It's interesting isn't it that this woman didn't *choose* to come to Jesus. She didn't ask for anything. She didn't repent and beg for mercy. She unexpectedly encountered the amazing, unbelievably generous grace of Jesus. The truth was not denied or swept under the carpet but in the light of grace she was given the freedom to live a whole new life from this moment on.

When grace and truth come together nothing is left hidden - nothing about us and nothing about the way God loves. Jesus makes it abundantly clear that when our truth meets God's love we are embraced by a grace that takes our breath away. As John says about Jesus: "From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace."<sup>4</sup> All that's left for us to do is live in the light of it. That of course is the key! God's grace is poured out for all who will receive it. The gospel accounts don't tell us what the son or the woman in these stories did when they were "surprised by grace". But the prodigal's older brother tells us that not everyone lives in the light of what is freely available. The grace Jesus offers is not "too good to be true" unless we make it so.

- 1 John 1:14
- 2 Luke 15:11-32
- 3 John 8:1-11
- 4 John 1:16

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### THE RADICALITY OF GRACE *by David Grant*

Grace - an elusive virtue not at all within our control. Not like its sister, Truth, which can be accumulated, stored, transported, manipulated, managed, and meted out, withheld or distorted, even shaped into weapons of warfare and used to maim another. That is why grace is around, to keep an eye on truth and to stop it becoming hard and unyielding. We need truth, but truth with grace acting as its minder, for a truth run community becomes inhumane and Gospel denying.

(The flip side of truth without grace is grace without truth. That would require a different perspective from that addressed in this article. Unruly grace can easily degenerate into the soft, undemanding, undisciplined meanderings of narcissism and self-centredness masquerading as freedom of choice. Grace without the anchor points of truth easily becomes ahistorical, un-storied, un-texted, and we draw only on our own meagre experience of life).

Grace - the fundamental dynamic in God's move toward humankind, the prime colour in the theological spectrum, the controlling metaphor in the range of metaphors available to us as we contemplate God's character. Of all God's behaviours toward us, grace is the one we could well learn to mimic. However, it takes insight to recognise it, and it takes a yielding of control to discover its power.

The Biblical text contains a rich array of metaphors, which trace the lines of grace; here are three:

- 1 By a gracious outpouring of love we are called *children of God* (Hosea 11:1; Isaiah 1:2; John 1:12). We are no longer called orphans being motherless or fatherless (see Deuteronomy 32:18), or slaves with no rights in the household. We are now emancipated with all the freedoms and risky-ness that status brings. Not only that, but the former orphan and the former slave now have siblings and fellow emancipates to enjoy and act responsibly with.
- 2 Through God's gracious move we are called *friends*. That is not a new concept for God - see Isaiah 41:8, where Abraham is counted as a friend of God. Jesus takes on that same hazardous move when he calls all his followers friends (John 15:15), and Jesus places the friendship category in opposition to the slave category, where the slave is always kept in ignorance of the sovereign's intention. A consequence of being called a friend of Jesus is, we are part of a friendship group where we did not choose the membership (John 15:16).
- 3 In implementing a surprising employment policy God enlists each follower as a *servant* (Mark 10:43-44; Isaiah 42:1-4). The Union protocol is that servants do not raise their voice against fellow servants (Isaiah 42:2), nor do they seek ascendancy over their fellows (Mark 10:41ff). Further, employment conditions are in the hands of the firm's owner, not in the hands of the employees (Matthew 20:1ff).

God's gracious initiatives gift us with the status of *child, friend, and servant*, and as we take on these three, we recognise certain limitations and freedoms, which we would not have, except for God's grace.

The freedoms are, we are no longer orphans, abandoned, not belonging with no history nor future, but we are children, adopted, chosen, loved, and placed in the care of a supportive parent.

We are no longer lonely strangers, unrecognised foreigners, faceless refugees, with no rights or vocabulary of hope, but we are friends, invited to the table, hearing the significant conversations, enjoying the intimate companionship of our fellows.

We are no longer independent operators, autonomous individuals where we demand or expect that the world will fulfil our needs, but we are servants who take on the costly task of tending to the hopes of other people.

We have no right to be a child, a friend, a servant of the living God; it is all gifted to us. We have no right to parental embrace, or inclusion in the conversation, or employment in God's counter-revolution for the world; it is all freely granted because of God's love affair with the world.

We could take advantage of that, and some of us do, and all of us do some of the time. But when we do we invite death. God won't be mocked even by the best of us, and this God is not at our disposal. Ezekiel 36:22ff makes it clear that God will act in life-giving ways, but not because we have earned God's attention. It is because of God's own character bias that God comes across with life. Israel may then be shamed into life. One reading of the parable of the dishonest manager (Luke 16:1-9) is that the manager took advantage of the known character of the business owner, who would not act out of character. Best not to push God like that.

The limitations of being designated *child, friend, servant*, are, we no longer generate the initiatives. Such is the nature of grace, that it is generated from beyond us, and we are the recipients of its extraordinary favour. The child is on a journey toward maturity; the friend is becoming the intimate confidant; the servant is given more and more responsibility on their path towards costly, healing humility. We are all on the way, and no one can claim precedence or exclusive truth.

Self-impressed people violate the protocols of grace by treating fellow travellers, fellow human beings, as though they were disenfranchised orphans, alien strangers, or disobedient disconnected individuals. Grace-bearers will dismantle the claims of pre-eminence both for themselves, and for the fellowship to which they belong.

So how would a community of grace bearers act? My guess is by mimicking the graciousness of God that brought it into being. That means adopting a stance of generous giving. Since most issues end up on a chosen bottom line of economics, let's start there. A friend of mine - a minister - has argued successfully with his Session that if anyone asks for the use of the Church or Church property, they get it for free. He calls it a grace model of being. He has discovered that the 'no strings attached' approach evokes a generosity, which out-gives paying customers. They are not customers; they are friends. He extends the grace model into his own personal life - no fees for anything he might offer to people who walk through the door. Someone talked once about it being better to give rather than receive (Acts 20:35).

The grace model goes far beyond economics. Most of our fellowships are embroiled in an 'us versus them' on a number of issues, in direct violation of the protocols of grace. Truth, respectable as it is, becomes the armoury and the ammunition to fight the war, so much so that truth is getting a bad name in the common conversation of the nation, a conversation characterised by contention, discord, and dissent.

The refreshing humility of servant hood, the healing tenderness of friendship, and the nurturing strength of sisterhood/brotherhood is lost in the conversation, and lost to all of us who seek to be faithful to the Christ who calls us. We become lost indeed.

So what might we do? Mute the loud clamour, and give away the quest for control, the central temptation at the core of every one of us. Let conservatives be conservatives and liberals be liberals, orthodox be orthodox, evangelicals be evangelicals, charismatics be charismatics, and each give generous blessing to the other in their quest for faithful obedience. And if there are any other camps, let them be generous too, and loosen their tent pegs so that each one's vision is expanded.

The protocols of grace invite us to relinquish control, and invite us to live the life of the maturing child along with other children, to become the intimate confidant with God and all God's creatures, and to practise being the obedient servant who has the nerve to pay the cost of healing humility.

Easter 2 2005

The seminal idea of the metaphors of *child, friend, and servant* come from Walter Brueggemann in a chapter in *Interpretation and Obedience - From Faithful Reading to Faithful Living*, Fortress Press, 1991. The chapter (pp 161-183) is titled 'The Transformative Agenda of the Pastoral Office'.

### **GRACE AND ITS EXPECTATIONS: OFFERING UP OUR CRUMPLED 'AMEN' by Murray Rae**

The nineteenth century Danish theologian Søren Kierkegaard spent much of his life lamenting the fact that his contemporaries had failed to understand the nature of God's grace. Luther has taught us about grace, Kierkegaard said, but 'the world is like a drunken peasant; if you help him up on one side of the horse, he falls off the other side.'<sup>1</sup> Kierkegaard's complaint was that his contemporaries had forgotten the need for works. Luther did not need to mention works, for his life expressed them, but now we have forgotten the demands, we have forgotten that our lives should be different as a result of God's grace. So thought Søren Kierkegaard—and with good biblical reason. For the Bible makes clear again and again, that God's grace calls us forth to new life.

In Matthew 18: 23-35, for instance, Jesus tells a story about a king who wished to settle the debts owed to him by his slaves. There was one slave who owed ten thousand talents (about fifteen year's wages) and who had no chance of repaying the debt. As Jesus tells the story, the king responded to the slave's anguished plea for mercy by cancelling the debt. That same slave went out, however, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him 100 denarii (one day's wage), seized him by the throat and demanded that he pay. It was not that the slave was violating some rule, indeed the law was on his side—debts ought to be repaid, says the law—but he failed to see how life should be different in the light of the freedom that had been granted to him. Jesus concludes his story by urging his hearers to forgive one another from their hearts. That's not a new law, nor is it something that ought to be done in order to earn God's favour; it's just a description of what new life looks like in the light of God's grace. As for the one who had been forgiven his debts, when his master heard what had happened, he handed him over to be tortured until his entire debt had been repaid. That should not be construed as the undoing of grace. The parable simply makes clear that in refusing to act in the light of grace, the unforgiving slave is plunged back into captivity, back into that life of bondage from which he had been set free. Grace expects something of us; and what it expects is precisely what it also enables—new life! It remains for us only to let go of the old.

The pattern of new life following grace is manifest also in the ten commandments, though I much prefer the Jewish description—the Decalogue, or the 'ten words'. For there are not ten commands; there are ten words,<sup>2</sup> and the first is the word of grace: 'I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery' (Exodus 20:2). That is the news of grace. God has delivered his people from bondage and set them free for new life in the land that he has provided (cf. Deuteronomy 6: 20-25). What follows then, in the remaining nine words, is a description of what that new life will look like. You shall have no other gods before me; you shall not build any idols; you shall not abuse God's name, you shall keep the Sabbath holy, and so on... Of course! What else should we expect of the people whom God has set free? Their alternative is to live in captivity to idols once more, to abuse the one who is their deliverer, to refuse the Sabbath rest that he gives them, and to plunge themselves into bondage once more. But grace has made possible a new life. Why should they return to the old?

And yet they do! The motley crowd who straggled out of Egypt turned to grumbling when the milk and honey didn't flow straight away (Exodus 16:2). Freedom, the kind of freedom granted by God's grace, involves a long faithfulness, but the people delivered from bondage got tired of that freedom just six weeks in. And pretty soon after that, they were back to their idols again (Exodus 32). This is not only Israel's story. It's our story too. We struggle with God's grace because the new life it enables is the hard option; it is a life in which grudges are not borne and revenge is not sought. It is a life of gratitude and praise rather than of grumbling. It is a life lived after the pattern of God's beloved son. Most of us walk falteringly on

that road, hesitant to trust the grace that has delivered us from bondage and that promises abundant life in its place. And so we walk uncertainly; we stumble; we look back over our shoulders at the old life left behind and wonder whether there is not a more secure life to be had back in the land of Egypt.

Why that should be is not clear; there is an inexplicability about it, that in the light of God's grace we should prefer the darkness and turn back from a life made new. But often enough, indeed too often, we do just that! God, however, has made provision for our failing. 'My grace is sufficient for you,' God says, 'my power is made perfect in weakness' (2 Corinthians 12:9). The requirement has been met! Not in our own strength shall we be able to live the new life, but in the strength of God's grace. It is through the nudging and enabling, the comforting and the prompting of God's Spirit who comes as gently as a dove, that we human beings, beloved of God, are restored again and again to new life. Any talk of finding favour with God, therefore, any talk of strings being attached to God's grace is a refusal to hear that grace is sufficient. It plunges us back into bondage and fails to recognise that God has set us free. Equally, however, any talk of sinning all the more that grace may abound (Romans 6:1), and any refusal of the new life to which God calls us is a failure to hear what grace is for—precisely, new life in reconciled relation with God and with our neighbour.

Refusal of this new life, manifest in the work that we do, is what Kierkegaard complained of. He complained of a failure to hear what grace is for; he complained that life for his contemporaries—from whose company he did not exclude himself—went on just as it was before. Revenge was still sought, grudges were still born, and, for all the talk of grace, it was as if the saviour had never lived. Kierkegaard did not expect perfection, but he expected honesty. He expected an honest admission that grace demands something of us, and he expected repentance in the face of our failure to meet that demand.

Kierkegaard's own life is nicely captured in a poem by R.S. Thomas who, acknowledging Kierkegaard's suffering, writes,

...wounded he crawled  
To the monastery of his chaste thought  
To offer up his crumpled amen.<sup>3</sup>

Offering up 'his crumpled amen' is an epitaph of which Kierkegaard himself would approve, I think, and it describes well our human response to the grace of God. There is an inadequacy about all that we human beings may offer to God, and yet our response is accepted, nonetheless. The 'Amen', therefore, signifies a grateful assent—assent to God, assent to his forgiveness, assent to his acceptance of us whatever form our own crumpledness takes. And finally, the 'Amen' is our word of recognition that the immeasurable grace of God 'demands my soul, my life, my all'.<sup>4</sup>

- 1 Søren Kierkegaard, *For Self-Examination and Judge for Yourself!* Ed and trans Howard V. Hong & Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990) p.24.
- 2 The church has made various attempts to find ten commands in the remaining nine 'words', most commonly by dividing the last command into two so that coveting one's neighbour's house is a distinct command, followed by another against coveting wives, slaves, animals etc., That seems unduly contrived, however. We do better, I think, to recognise that we are given ten words and only nine of them are commands.
- 3 R.S.Thomas, 'Kierkegaard' in *Selected Poems 1946-1968* (Newcastle Upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1986) 86.
- 4 Isaac Watts, 'When I Survey the Wondrous Cross'

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### RAHNER'S THEOLOGY OF GRACE by Mark F. Fischer

An old friend and colleague, a seminary professor, said Mass in my parish on Trinity Sunday. He announced to the congregation that he was celebrating the 45<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his ordination. I was surprised and delighted to see him, because he preaches simply and deeply.

My friend proclaimed the gospel from St. John, "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life."

As he stepped down from the ambo to give the homily, I began to worry. The passage from St. John can mean many things. How would my friend interpret it?

- Would he present God as acting from the outside on humanity's behalf?
- Would he interpret the gift of the Son in terms of God's condescension?

- My friend began his homily and these fears crowded my mind. Let me explain how they arose.

### **Uncreated Grace**

For many years I have studied the theology of Karl Rahner, the German Jesuit who died in 1984. In 1976, he published his most comprehensive and systematic work, entitled *Foundations of Christian Faith*. In the book, Rahner treats the theology of grace in ways that might surprise a traditional Catholic.

A traditional Catholic (raised, for example, under the influence of books like Father Ludwig Ott's 1952 *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*) understood grace as God's free gift. It is sanctifying and actual. Sanctifying grace is a constant quality of the soul that makes it pleasing to God. Actual grace is a temporary intervention by God which stirs us up to attain or preserve grace. In both, grace is something created by God. It is distinct from God's own life.

Rahner affirmed this traditional teaching but placed it in a deeper context. He reminded the Catholic world that, distinct from these created graces (sanctifying and actual), there is an uncreated grace. Such uncreated grace is none other than the true God, the God who exists from all eternity. In the act of creating graces, God communicates something more primordial - the divine life itself.

This teaching is not new. The Church has always taught about uncreated grace. It speaks, for example, about the incarnation of the divine Word, about the God who dwells in the souls of the just, and about the beatific vision. Before Rahner, however, Catholics often overlooked uncreated grace. They focused on the created graces we call sanctifying and actual, more so than on God's very life.

Created graces are gifts of God, but they are not the divine giver. When I heard the words, "God so loved the world," I fretted about how my friend would interpret them in his Trinity Sunday homily. Would he present the salvation of the world as something that God did on humanity's behalf from the outside? Or would he show how God gave the divine life itself to human beings?

### **The Gift of the Son**

By focusing on created graces, traditional Catholics tended to see the immense chasm between themselves and God. To them, God seemed timeless, awesome, and remote. To be sure, divinity could still touch humanity. But the Church usually understood this touch in images akin to Michelangelo's creation of Adam on the Sistine Chapel Ceiling. God touched humanity by creating something that was not God.

This is not, however, the full story. God gives - not just created things - but the divine life itself. The greatest instance of this is the incarnation of the divine Word in Jesus Christ. Theology speaks of the hypostatic union of two natures, of divinity fused with humanity. Today we would say that God did not just send an embassy to human beings. In Jesus Christ, the divine and the human were united.

Catholics have traditionally understood this unity as a once-and-for-all achievement. In the language of Philippians, they emphasized the condescension of God, who "emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in human likeness." In short, they tended to view Jesus Christ as a divine person, paying relatively little attention to his humanity. Christ was the one who acted on our behalf, more so than the one who stood with us in the solidarity of human nature.

For Karl Rahner, however, an emphasis on the divine condescension will not suffice. Such a narrow focus tends to mute something that Christians ought to broadly proclaim, namely, the humanity of Jesus. In Jesus Christ, human nature was wholly united with God. Christ was not just the instrument through whom God worked. He was the one who realized union with God as the true destiny of human beings.

Knowing this gave rise to my second anxiety on Trinity Sunday. I feared that my friend (expounding how God so loved the world) might overemphasize God's condescension. I feared that he might neglect the humanity of Jesus.

### **Faith as Life with God**

My third anxiety was about belief. Whoever believes in the Son shall not perish, says the gospel, but have eternal life. Traditional Catholics have understood belief in terms of faith. It is a theological virtue, infused at Baptism. For the traditional Catholic, faith refers to the habit of belief in the incomprehensible God, a God known by revelation, not by reason.

This kind of theology poses a double threat to today's Christian. First of all, it seems to identify revelation with an official body of Church teaching. God is revealed (so this theology goes) in an explicit deposit, i.e., the facts of salvation history. Second, faith can become mere assent to these facts. Believers accept them on the authority of the Church. Faith shrinks into a body of teaching that believers profess.

The danger of this theological understanding, as Rahner pointed out, is its distortion of the very nature of revelation and faith. Under its influence, revelation can come to seem nothing more than facts, facts about God's life in salvation history. Faith can seem to be merely a correct understanding of them.

Rahner taught that faith is more than an assent to the official teachings of Catholic Christianity. It is a relationship with God. God reveals the divine self by constantly offering people choices about their lives.

The Church is the sacrament, the effective sign of Christ that helps people understand God's presence in the choices they make. They choose by hearing and obeying God, or by deafening themselves and disobeying.

So what is belief today? On Trinity Sunday, I listened to the gospel affirm that whoever believes in the Son should not perish. I worried about how my friend would interpret this. Is belief merely assent to teachings about the incarnate Word? Or is it also an attentive listening to the Word who speaks in every human decision?

### **God So Loved the World**

My friend began his homily. I knew that he was going to address the greatest mysteries of God and the Church. I worried about how he would present the incarnation that I cherished in Rahnerian terms. It was the decisive moment when God's uncreated life became a human gift. It was the actualization of our destiny, when human nature would be united with God's own. It was the consummation of a relationship between believers and the God who is present to them in their every decision. What would my friend say? "The most important words in this passage," he said, "are the words, 'God so loved the world.'" In this one assertion, my friend leapt over the obstacles that I feared might trip him up. He cut to the heart of the gospel and the celebration of the Trinity. That heart is grace of a loving God who reconciles human beings to the divine life by sharing that life with them.

### **GRACE IN JUDAISM by JoEllen Duckor**

We don't really have a concept of Grace in Judaism. It is more of a character trait. It is one of the attributes of God. In our prayers for peace we ask for: *chen*, *v'chesed*, *v'rachamim* grace and love and mercy to descend upon us.

So, I looked up *Chen* in the Lexicon. The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon describes *Chen* as "favour, grace, elegance, form, appearance, acceptance, beauty." It is an inner glow, an inner beauty. The Lexicon says the first mention of *Chen* in the Torah is Genesis chapter 6 verse 8: "And Noah found *chen* favour/grace in Gods eyes."

Noah found grace. In Hebrew this reads: Noah matza Chen. Noah is spelled Nun Chet. (N, CH) Chen is spelled Chet Nun. (CH, N) Noah and Chen form a palindrome. What is this relationship between Noah and the grace with which God sees him?

God regrets that he made humanity. He should not have created the world and He should definitely not have entrusted its fate to a creature such as a human being. He will blot out all the creatures of creation. This is actually the undoing of creation. Everything will be erased. All that lives will cease to live. Then abruptly the story takes a sharp turn: without any warning, UNEXPECTEDLY, *ve noah matza chen beinei adonoy*. And Noah found grace in the eyes of God. How did Noah instantly become chosen by God?

Noah is chosen because he finds favour in God's eyes. He is saved because of the grace of God. He is beautiful to God. Perhaps because *chen* first appears in the Torah juxtaposed with its opposite, *Noach*, *chen* represents balance and symmetry. God sees in Noah that aspect of beauty which expresses itself as a graceful symmetry.

The Talmud tells us that "Noah had a death sentence sealed against him. But he found favour in the eyes of God" (Sanhedrin 108a) Noah is no different from those who are doomed. He is included in God's regret. It is God's grace that changes Noah into Chen.

Blu Greenberg says that God chooses Noah not because he has achieved significant wisdom or virtue, but because God seeks to convey to SOMEONE, the knowledge of Himself. She says that the story of Noah is a story about the transformation of the relationship between God and humanity. At first, God destroys, then perhaps out of a sense of loss and love, God promises to accept human beings with all of our flaws, and promises never to destroy them again.

Perhaps God learns grace from us.

### **THE GRACE OF GOD IN ISLAMIC THINKING by Ahmed Zaoui**

Grace is central to our relationship to God and with each other, and touches every aspect of our daily lives. The grace of God is the core of any religion, and I am honoured to accept this invitation to discuss the grace of God in Islamic thinking.

The topic is especially dear to my heart. To explain why, let me share a personal experience. While I was in Belgium, I used to converse with a priest who showed great regard for Islam. Once, he told me that when he saw Muslims praying and prostrating to God, he felt great respect for the way Muslims love God. I used to

have gentle arguments with him about theological matters. One day, we talked about love and religion. He said to me that Islam, unlike Christianity, does not have a developed concept of love. I replied to him with an anecdote. I asked him, when you enjoy a dinner, what do you say? He said "J'aime manger". Suppose a man wanted to say he loved his wife? He said, "J'aime ma femme". And if you want to say you love God? "J'aime Dieu". I then replied to him that in Arabic, there are eighty-four different words for love, and each has an appropriate usage - for example, a love of nature, towards family, or friends. Some words are so deep and emotional that they can only be used in reference to God.

Love, grace, and mercy are central to Islamic discourse. Islam comes from *salam* which means peace and love. The familiar greeting *salam aleikum* illustrates the concern of Islam to spread this message of peace. It is said in the Koran that the mission of the Prophet Mohammed was to spread mercy, not just among believers but to all humanity. The Koran says "...and we have not sent you (O Mohammed), except as a mercy to the worlds" (21:107). The God that Muslims worship is a God for all humanity, not just for Muslims. There is no concept of 'our God', but rather the God of all. Every verse of the Koran starts with the description of God as "the most gracious, the most merciful". In every act that a Muslim does in life, whether eating, or entering a home, he or she says *bismillah rahman rahim* - in the name of God, the most gracious, the most merciful.

The closest Arabic translation for grace is *al'rahman*, a great mercy, but there are many other synonyms which are used in different contexts; for example *al'madad* (providing generously for need without reward), *al'ghaouth* (relief from suffering or hardship), *al'manam* (providing bountifully), among others. There are also numerous names for God in Islam, each of which reflects a particular aspect of His grace. For example, God is called *al'hannan*, meaning the loving and warm-hearted.

In Islam, the grace of God is manifested in many ways.

God's grace is manifested in his gifts to humanity. God is described as *al'atte*, He who gives, which derives from the verb *atta*, to give. God created the universe - in its precision, balance, and harmony - and the created humanity. The Prophet said, as did Jesus, that human beings were created in God's image. Man, being created in God's image, is provided for by God's grace in his creation and surroundings. "It is He who sends down rain from the sky; from it you drink and out of it (grows) the vegetation from which you feed your cattle. With it He causes to grow for you the crops, olives, palm trees, grapevines, and all the fruits. Indeed in that is a sign for thinking people. And He has subjected the night and day to his will for you, and the sun and moon, and the stars also. Indeed, in that are signs for people who reason" (16:10-12).

God's grace is also apparent in compassion between human beings and care for the natural environment. Islam calls for a positive engagement with the universe by not causing harm. The Koran commands humanity "...and cause not corruption upon the earth after it's formation and invoke Him in fear and inspiration, indeed the mercy of Allah comes to the doers of kind deeds" (7:56). The Koran also says "... do good as Allah has done good to you, and desire not corruption in the land. Indeed, Allah does not like corrupters" (28:77). Harmony with the universe and harmony between people is a gift from God. As the Prophet says, one must protect this gift by removing obstacles one comes across that could impede others who come along the same path later. Another saying of the Prophet is that Allah created mercy in one hundred parts, and He retained with Him ninety-nine parts and sent down to the earth one part, from which emanates the compassion and mercy that all of creation exercises towards one another, so much so that an animal lifts its hoof over its young lest it should hurt it. Islam emphasises that the whole of humanity, created as it was from a single soul, suffers if one human being suffers. As well as compassion towards other human beings, Islam teaches us to be compassionate to animals in not cursing, beating, or unnecessarily burdening them. To illustrate, the Prophet instructs us not to use animals that we ride for travel as chairs to sit on when we stop! Similarly, hunting for sport, and the killing of pregnant animals, is prohibited in Islam.

God also bestows grace by emphasising moderation in the practice of Islam. The Koran advocates 'easiness' in religious practice. "... Allah intends every facility for you; He does not want to put you to difficulties" (2:185). In Islam, exceptions can be made to religious edicts if circumstances require. For example, a Muslim is prohibited from drinking alcohol, but if he is stuck in the desert and the only drink available is alcoholic, it is his duty to drink it because the preservation of human life takes precedence over observing religious rules.

One of the most significant manifestation of God's grace is in the redemption of sins. The Koran says "Despair not of the Mercy of Allah: verily, Allah forgives all sins. Truly, He is Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful" (39: 53). "And My Mercy embraces all things" (7:156). God is also called *al'ghafur*, the pardoner. With repentance, one's bad intentions can be forgiven, and if those intentions were not carried out this can weigh strongly in one's favour. Mohammed taught us this about the generosity of God's grace, explaining that "He who intends to do an evil act and has not done it, then Allah records it for Himself as a full good deed."

At this point, I would like to make an observation about the redemption of sins in Islam which may be of interest to readers from other religions. In Islam, if one sins against God, one can seek forgiveness through prayer and be redeemed, no matter how grave the sin or how many times it is repeated. As well as that, if one sins against another but is forgiven by him, the transgressor is absolved of his sin without the involvement of God. This is because, in Islam, absolution is a right of human beings. It is not exclusively the right of God. Thus Islam actively encourages people to show mercy and resolve disputes between themselves.

Islam focuses on good deeds rather than prayers alone. It is stated many times in the Koran that God does not need our worship, for God is free of need. Worship is not important for its own sake, but for encouraging good deeds and harmonious relationships. In fact, in Islam, the term 'worship' (*al ibadah*) includes much of what people do in their daily lives - all the little, ordinary things they do 'in the name of God'. Elsewhere, it is said that Mohammed taught his followers that the believer who gets to know other people and is supportive of them is most beloved of others: "all mankind is the family of Allah, but the person who is loved most by God is he who does good for mankind."

Similarly, an outward appearance of regular worship and piety in which one is however merely going through the motions, is not enough. In the account that is kept of every person's life, any evil deeds far outweigh paying lip service to worship. The Prophet once repeated thrice "By Allah, he is not a believer!". When asked who that was, he replied "one whose neighbour does not feel safe from his evil", a clear illustration that pious observance of religious rules may be wholly undermined by sinful deeds. The Prophet, in discussing a Muslim's obligation to fast during Ramadan, said that "If one does not eschew lies and false conduct, Allah has no need that he should abstain from his food and his drink".

I would like to close by posing two questions, which I have tried to address in part.

Firstly, how do we become entitled to God's redemption? By faith, by good deeds, or by a combination of the two?

Secondly, in our daily lives, how do we spread God's grace, which all religions, including Islam, recognise and celebrate? My experiences in New Zealand have taught me many lessons, one of which I would like to share. I discovered that the Maori word for God, *atua*, meaning Giver, is very similar to one of the descriptions of God in Islam, *al'atte*, which bears the same meaning. Perhaps in the same way that words have flown around the world to enable us to find commonalities in the language of grace between a peaceful country in the South Pacific and the conflict-ravaged Middle East, God's grace can be spread among peoples through compassion and tolerance. God's grace is not limited, for God is unlimited and eternal. Nor is God's grace limited to the pious. God's grace is for all those who would weep for their fellow man.

To illustrate that last point, I would like to end with a moving story. On seeing his grandson dying, the Prophet began to cry. One of his followers asked why he, as the Prophet, should cry. The Prophet replied, "It is compassion which Allah has placed in the hearts of his servants. Allah bestows His mercy on the merciful among his servants."

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## COSTLY GRACE

"Costly grace" is the title of the opening chapter of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's book *Nachfolge*, in English *The Cost of Discipleship*. Translated into English in 1937 and published in 1949 it was quickly recognised as an important counter to cheap grace offered by state aligned churches such as his own Lutheran Church in Germany.

Bonhoeffer's commitment to costly grace as a disciple of Jesus in Nazi Germany saw him join the movement to assassinate Hitler, for which he was hung in Flossenbergl jail a few weeks before the end of the Second World War.

Here's what he wrote about cheap and costly grace:

"Cheap grace is the deadly enemy of the Church. We are fighting today for costly grace.

Cheap grace means grace sold on the market like cheapjacks' wares. The sacraments, the forgiveness of sin, and the consolations of religion are thrown away at cut prices. Grace is represented as the Church's inexhaustible treasury, from which she showers blessings with generous hands, without asking questions or fixing limits. Grace without price; grace without cost! ...

Cheap grace means grace as a doctrine, a principle, a system. It means forgiveness of sins proclaimed as general truth, the love of God taught as the Christian "conception" of God. ...

Cheap grace means the justification of sin without the justification of the sinner. Grace alone does everything, they say, and so everything can remain as it was. ... Instead of following Christ, let the Christian enjoy the consolations of his grace! That is what we mean by cheap grace ...

Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.

Costly grace is the treasure hidden in the field; ... It is the pearl of great price to buy which the merchant will sell all his goods. ... it is the call of Jesus Christ at which the disciple leaves his nets and follows him.

Costly grace is the gospel which must be *sought* again and again, the gift which must be *asked* for, the door at which a man must *knock*.

Such grace is *costly* because it calls us to follow, and it is *grace* because it calls us to follow *Jesus Christ*. It is costly because it costs a man his life, and it is grace because it gives a man the only true life. It is costly because it condemns sin, grace because it justifies the sinner. Above all it is *costly* because it cost God the life of his Son: "ye were bought with a price," and what has cost God much cannot be cheap for us. Above all, it is *grace* because God did not reckon his Son too dear a price to pay for our life, but delivered him up for us. Costly grace is the Incarnation of God. ...

... it is grace because Jesus says, 'My yoke is easy and my burden is light.'

*The Cost of Discipleship*. MacMillan Publishing. 1963. Selections from pp45-48.

### LOOKING AFTER GRACE by Jeannie Cochrane

Last year I had a personally significant dream in which I was given three children to look after. The children all had names, and as part of working with the dream I did some investigating to find out what the names meant. I was amazed to discover that all three children had names whose meanings were very relevant in terms of where I was in my journey with God at that time.

One of these children was Grace. My Oxford Children's Dictionary (very useful when you want a simple and straightforward definition!) lists one of the meanings of grace as "God's loving mercy." In turn, mercy is defined as "kindness and forgiveness towards someone you have the power to hurt or punish." I began to contemplate what it might mean for me to "look after Grace."

The grace of God is something that has become more talked about in recent years with books such as Philip Yancey's *What's So Amazing About Grace* helping to bring this into focus. I have personally had some occasions when I have become particularly aware of God's grace towards me and have soaked in that experience. These have been special times!

Yes, God's grace is amazing, but how does it work in the midst of my ordinary everyday life? Since having the dream I have become more aware of the times when I am hurting or punishing myself, not physically but by the thoughts I think, the negative self talk that goes on inside of my head. This is where I have found "looking after Grace" to be particularly significant. At those times I have the opportunity to take God's grace and apply it to myself.

For example, recently my husband John and I had a few days camping in the Kauaeranga Valley, near Thames. While there we did the tramp to the Pinnacles Hut which our tramping book indicated would take anywhere from two and a half to four hours one way. Now I enjoy tramping, but I only began a regular exercise programme four years ago and while I am much fitter than I used to be, I am still on the slow side comparatively. Because of this it took us five hours to get to the hut - including a number of stops while I caught my breath after climbing up yet another set of steps cut into the rock! Later that evening some younger people arrived at the hut and they had come from the car park to the top in just two hours! I began to hear my self talk: "You are so slow, you took even longer than the slowest time in the book, you held John up - he could go much faster on his own, you don't do very well at this do you; maybe you should just give it up..."

Yes, I definitely have the power to hurt and punish myself! But then above this noisy internal monologue I remembered I have been given Grace to look after! Now another level of self talk was available to me, involving words of kindness and forgiveness ... That was quite a challenging walk with so much of it uphill while carrying an overnight pack on my back, so I did really well to get here; it doesn't matter how long it takes me, the important thing is to be out there and participating. John has told me he is quite happy to go at my pace so I choose to believe and accept that."

From this perspective I found myself free to acknowledge how refreshing and invigorating this walk had been and I felt thankful for the level of health and fitness that I do have, which makes participation in such outdoor activities a possibility for me.

This is but one example of a number of occasions since having the dream where I have caught myself in negative self talk and I am learning to "look after Grace" at such times. The outcome when I do is always a move towards embracing more of the "life in all its fullness" which Jesus said he came to give us. Equally I

can see that if I fail to “look after Grace” the result is likely to be an increasing withdrawal from engaging more fully with life and ultimately with God.

The grace of God is an amazing gift. But unless I take steps to allow this kindness and forgiveness to affect the way I treat myself in my ordinary, everyday life it is somewhat like opening a gift from a friend and then admiring it from afar as it sits unused on a shelf. I want to continue to learn to “look after Grace” and consequently to live more fully the life that Jesus came to give me.

### **GRACE AND CONTEMPLATION** *by Andrew Dunn*

Antarctica is an overwhelming place. I was there in March, along the north eastern edge of the Antarctic Peninsula. My life-long interest in the great southern continent did little to prepare me for the reality of being there.

We flew from Auckland to Buenos Aires and then down to Ushuaia on the island of Tierra del Fuego and sailed across the Drake Passage in a Russian oceanographic research ship, the Akademik Ioffe. It was a comfortable and well-catered ship.

Landfall was shortly after dawn on the third morning. We spent the days travelling from landing site to landing site, often penguin and seal colonies, or cruising around glacier edged bays and islands in zodiacs photographing icebergs, wild life, and the mountains of Antarctica. Some of the party slept out on a snow covered icy slope one night - in 10 below sleeping bags and bivvy sacks!

I was overwhelmed by the size of everything, the extent of it, the beauty, the starkness and the awesome silence. I had never heard no sound till then! I realised after a couple of days that my sense of overwhelm came from my attempts to encompass it all, to photograph it all, to understand it all in a cerebral way - and I couldn't. It was like an overload of the mind.

I decided to set aside my need to get my head around it all and to switch on my contemplative faculty and see what happened. What a revelation! Entering it all with an open expectancy, delighting in the simple things (being there, stepping on to Antarctica each day, sitting with penguins, trusting our zodiac drivers to take us out and back safely each trip, enjoying the company, the exquisite play of light and shadow on ice and water) turned my difficulties into “wonder, love and praise”. They opened me to it all and it to me in a fresh way. I could be part of it and enjoy it for what it is, as it is and let it wash all over me and into me.

It was like the time at Teschemakers (on Taipo Hill at sunset) when I discovered I was a participant in the universe rather than an observer of it. That *cosmological shift* altered my stance to life and creation and I needed to recover it out there among the sea ice and bergy bits at -4 degrees. What a change that shift made! I had a whale of a time, not least among the humpbacks and minke, the seals and penguins, and all the birds. Even the “God spots”<sup>1</sup>, where the burst of sunlight through holes in the clouds lit up patches of sea ice or whatever they hit, took on special significance that left many of us gobsmacked. Signs of grace abounded for those with eyes and hearts to see them.

Rowan Williams writes of “... the sober acknowledgement that we must let go of the control of conceptual analysis when we are touched by God and advance to a stage beyond the life of conscious ‘natural’ ability, closed in upon itself”<sup>2</sup>. Bingo!

He's talking about what happens when we meet God for the first time (and anytime later) and begin to do theology. Theology begins, he says, “in a kind of a shock to, a paralysing of, the intellect - not by propositions that offend the intellect, but by an encounter with what cannot be mastered...”<sup>3</sup> Wow - has he been to Antarctica?

We must come to this task recognising that we're into deeper real things than we realise. It's not about getting our heads around it; we can't. It's not simply about how nice our feelings and reactions are to an experience. Rather, we're taken into deeper water than the intellect can measure; we're drawn further along than our words can describe. We're taken into the territory where words, ideas and images aren't adequate to describe this place, these experiences.

My comment above that I had never heard no sound until this trip is important here. The absence of sound in Antarctica is real, creating absolute silence. The total absence of sound on a calm day is stunning to those whose days are full of sound, and that's most of us. For me it's an illustration of the beginning of the apophatic, the deep truth that God can't be fully known or described by any of our senses and that sometimes it's better to say it's not like this or that. For some, the longer we are in The Way the more we describe our faith like that. Yet the depth of the silence also has the affect of an acute sense of presence. So also in spirituality.

Contemplating grace, as we're discussing it here, opens us not only to switching off the analytical and switching on the contemplative faculty. It also moves us further along the pathway of discovery (some would say “illumination”). We begin to realise that we are being taken out of our normal ways of knowing

God and grace to ways that are more silent, less cerebral, more empty of clutter, richer in relationship, and fuller into the love of the Trinity.

I don't like the notion of levels or heights or planes of spirituality because they suggest attainment. I prefer to talk about "further along" and "further into" as better depicting God's gracious leading. Thus "moving further into" finds there is no end to the length and breadth and height and depth of the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Williams also makes the cryptic point that this is not about individualistic experience but about how it is for all who travel this way. It's not about me and mine but about us and ours (my words, not his).

This is Body of Christ experience. It ought not to surprise us, therefore, when we meet people who are touching into apophaticity. They sense that things are changing from how they were when they first believed, or from the time of the big blessing, insight, experience. Favourite Scriptures go cold or empty. Worship can become tasteless. God moves away. The Spirit isn't so readily turned on. What a relief to know that's normal in the Christian life. Yet how few expect it and fewer teach it!

For those of us who are spiritual directors and pastors (in the shepherding the flock sense) we can develop a scent for this stuff and become very useful in helping folk to explore the movements that are on. Moreover, we need to go there deeply ourselves.

I wonder what all this means for our discoveries in Scripture, our use of the Sacraments as means of grace, our growing sense that there's more mystery about than we realised, being disciples of Jesus in our patches and witnesses to him, of being the Church, of relating to this harsh world in which we live?

Grace and contemplation go hand in hand. Grace's hand draws the contemplative further along and further into the depths and mystery of God in all the many ways that catch our attention and imagination.

Contemplation is the faculty that enables us to see and experience something of the wonders of grace. And we don't have to go to Antarctica for that! But it helps.

<sup>1</sup> Comment of John Rodstedt, the professional photographer on the expedition who helped us sharpen up our photography.

<sup>2</sup> Rowan Williams, "Eastern Orthodox Theology", in David F. Ford (ed.), *The Modern Theologians*. Blackwell 1989. Vol. 2. 153

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*

### **THE TREE, THE WATERFALL AND THE TRAMPOLINE: BEYOND PERSONAL IMAGES OF GOD by Adrienne Thompson**

'So you're interested in theology.' That was the response of a young man when I told him I was about to write an article about the images and language we use to describe God. My strong reaction: No. This is about experience. Not thinking about God, but reflecting on some of the ways it feels like to be with God. This isn't theology, but it is, I believe, the earth in which theology grows.

It seems that metaphor and simile are as natural a part of human language as sounds and syllables. We have no way of describing our experience of God (or any other invisible relationship) except by saying 'it was like ...'

I recall a description in a novel. The hero is telling his friend about his bride:

"...she is like a quiet and beautiful room where one can take refuge from noise and storms and ugliness, and sit back and feel peaceful and happy and completely content: a room that will always be there and always be the same."

Like a beautiful room, like a red, red rose, like a sleepy blue ocean, like a melody sweetly played ...the poets and singers describe their beloved and we lovers of God find images and metaphors for our experiences.

I grew up with the traditional loved and familiar images of God: Father, Shepherd, King, Friend. I well remember a moment in my teenage years in which my inner sense of loneliness and sadness was met by a warm, loving presence which the name of *Father* seemed perfectly to describe.

At different times the other words fit well with what I experienced. God my friend, with whom I shared the details of my day; God my King who required my loyalty and obedience; God my Shepherd who protected and nurtured me - perhaps this image came nearest to anything approaching a feminine image of God. (Certainly the Good Shepherd of my imagination always wore a long dress, had long wavy hair, and cuddled little lambs.)

At the same time, alongside the traditional names and images I had for God I was starting to recognise other pictures that somehow went with my experiences of God. Many of them were (and are) places. For example, a moment of quiet awe in worship 'translated' for me into a mental picture of white stones and a waterfall. The picture, like the experience, was drenched with God-ness but no human figure came into it.

God my light has been a dominant theme of my life. As a very little girl I ran away from home (I didn't want to go shopping.) After running down hill into the forest for a long time I decided I must be lost. I remember sitting down on a stone under the immensely tall trees, warmed by the sun, looking up and up through leaves and branches to deep blue sky. I can't remember if I prayed for help - but I was filled with the tranquil certainty that someone would come and find me if I waited. Ever since then my sense of God's providence has looked like the leafy pattern of shadow and sunshine that day, and sounded like the growth-filled silence of a great forest.

I remember a time when my spirit hurt all over - as if all the skin had been grated off me. I tried to seek for God's comfort but in images of *Father* or *Lord* I found only sternness and blame on this occasion. At a meeting I sat behind a woman who was holding a child over her shoulder. The little girl, three or four months old, looked at me and smiled. My misery, my depth of guilt and failure, meant nothing to that little baby. For me the trustful, joyful smile of a baby became my way back to a sense of being accepted by God. A grown-up mother or father couldn't reach me. A baby could.

Such images of God are not crafted to make a theological point but grow directly out of experience. Sometimes I later discover that Scripture or the saints have long ago used a similar metaphor. A baby, a stream, sunlight - all these images can be found in Scripture if I look for them. But some of the images that have delighted me are uniquely mine. Walking home, humming a song under my breath without really attending to the words, I came to the line *His steadfast love reaches to the heavens and his faithfulness to the clouds*. I looked up to a cloud-filled Wellington sky, and remembered suddenly how as a little girl I imagined the puffy clouds to be as bouncy as a springy bed. I felt myself bouncing on the love of God, free and joyful as a child on a trampoline, utterly safe to leap in any direction I choose because there's not the smallest chance of falling off.

God as trampoline. Some people might challenge that image on the grounds of irreverence. Are all and any images acceptable?

I think that in this area of my life as in every other I do need to be discerning. But what must be tested is not so much the image as the experience relating to it. In fact, orthodox, scriptural images of God can be misapplied with potentially brutal effect. A person's experience of a controlling mother or a tyrannical father can infuse these Biblical images with pain. Trying to approach God through this window might lead instead to a cosmic bully who has nothing in common with the God made known in Jesus.

So I don't censor the images but I do reflect on the context that gives them birth. Is there congruence with what I have known and experienced of God in the past? Does this experience fit with the God whom Jesus described, trusted, demonstrated?

Not every image of God that arises in prayer is life-giving. When I sat with a person who described her sense of god as an unpleasant grey mist that twists people into unnatural shapes I didn't affirm the image. In contrast, someone else pictured her relationship to God as something like a DNA molecule - and that image was clearly joyful for her.

'What's your current image of God?' I was asked recently. I hadn't thought about it particularly but there was more than one answer. It was Easter and I happened to be in an area of Australia that was ravaged by bush fires a year or two ago. Being with God and being with the Easter story in that context, resurrection joy reached me through the fire-blackened branches and bursting new leaves of a giant eucalyptus tree. Grace looked like sooty fingers and smelt like eucalyptus oil for me that Sunday.

Alongside that external, touchable image was another, inward one. I hadn't even been aware of it until I began to try to answer the question. God is a space. An emptiness within me. A silence that invites me to be present. In that enclosed quietness I am with God.

<sup>1</sup> from *The Far Pavilions* by M. M. Kaye, Penguin Books 1979, p.712

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### **CHANCE ENCOUNTER** by *John North*

We make our appointments to meet with God through joining in worship at the local church or in fellowship at a home group or in solitude somewhere.

But other types of encounter may come at unexpected times or places. Jacob went to sleep in desert darkness but woke to realise he was in the house of God, at the gate of heaven. Moses wandered over to have a look at a burning bush, encountered God and went on to change the course of history.

Part of spiritual growth is the ability to recognize the hand of God and discern the voice of God in apparently chance encounters. Here is a selection of such encounters I have come to know about. See if they ring any bells for you. Could you add to the list from your own experience?

The railway guard had a twinkle in his eye as Peter held up his ticket to be examined. "Ah yes!" was his beaming OK and Peter was provoked to comment;

"You look very happy today!"

The guard, with even more twinkle swung his arm towards the windows and simply said; " Why not?" as both gazed out on a wonderful vista of forest and green hills.

She was walking along a peaceful country road when a small boy, just off the school bus, came to greet her.

"Hello, what's your name?"

"Mary" she replied. "What's your's?"

"Andrew," he said and then went on to ask;

"Do you know me?"

Mary found herself re-positioned by this unusual question. It should have been , "Do I know you?" but the other question rather threw her.

"Do you know me?" he insisted

"No Andrew, I don't know you."

"Why don't you know me?"

This was getting worse and worse.

"Because I don't often come out this way"

"Why don't you....."

Mary realised she was confronted by an innocent and honest egotism. At this stage of life, Andrew saw himself as the centre of all things. If Mary was going to communicate with him, she needed to reckon with this attitude. Not, she ruefully reflected , that Andrew was much different from the rest of us.

The towering old grey stone cathedral was cold and echoing as he walked down the aisle. The war damage had been repaired but Tony felt there was something missing. Somehow there was no welcome from the old magnificence.

That was before someone started playing the organ, softly at first and then with increasing warmth, power and rhythm. Somehow the gothic arches came alive and the stained glass windows started to glow. Tony was no longer a visiting tourist and he knelt, alone except for the music and his God.

Peter was having trouble talking car engines to the German mechanic near Frankfurt. His pronunciation was so bad that he was making no progress at all. A friend stood by listening and finally broke in with;

"Do you know what you have to do to speak German properly?"

"No, what is it?"

"Just drop all your New Zealand vowels and start again."

Now what does that remind me of?

Peter was feeling hot and tired as he tried to hitch a ride in the hot Provençal sun. He'd had a great ride up from Barcelona but now... nothing. He watched idly as a senior sort of man rode his ancient bike along the road, noticed Peter, turned 180 degrees and stopped beside him. Glancing at the NZ flag on his pack, he asked;

"Hungry?"

"Yes, I am," replied Peter.

The cyclist reached behind him into a basket on the carrier and pulled out a large bunch of cherries.

"For you" he said, handing them over and pedalled down the road, hearing Peter's shouted "Thank you" as he rode.

Bob and Julie were enjoying their Fettucini in the Italian restaurant when two uniformed police entered. Their eyes quickly identified the two tourists whose V.W was parked outside .The senior officer came over and said (in excellent English)

"Your V W is parked in a no parking street. You will have to move it."

Bob nodded, put down his fork and started to stand up, reaching for the car keys.

"No, no," protested the policeman. "Finish your dinner first and then move the car."

"What a civilized country," murmured Julie as they continued their surprising meal.

### "MY GRACE IS SUFFICIENT FOR YOU" by Jeri Dexheimer

When I was asked to write this article on "Lutheran spirituality," my first thought was of a joke popular among classmates in seminary, many of whom were life-long Lutherans. The joke was that "Lutheran spirituality" is an oxymoron, the point being that there is no such thing as "Lutheran spirituality." But as a (relatively) new Lutheran, indeed, still a new Christian, that was not my experience.

Maybe it's because the concept of "spirituality" carries with it the expectation of "feeling good," getting the warm fuzzies, or that having spirituality, being a spiritual person, is going to make getting through life easier. If that's one's definition of spirituality, then no, Lutheran spirituality does not qualify.

A central piece of the tradition of Lutheran theology is what's known as "the theology of the cross." It refers to God's turning the world's expectations of what God is like on their heads - it is grounded in the foolish notion that God's fullest self-revelation to the world is in the suffering and death of a man on a cross. What a ridiculous claim this is! As Paul says, this is foolishness to a world that looks for power and wisdom and signs. "For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.....For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength" (1 Corinthians 1:18-25, Revised Standard Version).

And underlying this is, for me, what is at the very heart of Lutheran spirituality: the doctrine of justification by grace through faith in Christ, apart from works of the law (Romans 3:21-28). And, my sisters and brothers, this is what is so amazing, this is nothing short of God's liberation to us and for us in Jesus Christ! That we, all of us, who are broken and sinful, so often kind of stumbling along in this world, trying to be good people, trying to please God, trying to live up the countless expectations that are placed on us - the simple and plain reality is that by God's grace in Jesus Christ, we do not have to save or free or liberate ourselves! That by God's grace through the cross, it is simply given to us and done for us.

This is about unconditional love, something which I find so hard to accept. As a dear friend said to me during the time of my adult conversion experience, "Kind of weirds you out, doesn't it?" And yes, it does "weird" us out. Because darn it, I want to be worthy, I want to be good enough, I want to be deserving! But the truth is, I'm not, and I can't be, I don't have it in me. The reality for us as human beings is that we are radically dependent on God's grace, *karis* in the Greek, "free gift," because what we are given in Jesus Christ is simply something that we are not capable of earning for ourselves. As Paul Tillich (one of the great European Lutheran theologians of the 20<sup>th</sup> century) says in his book *The Shaking of the Foundations*, "You don't have to do anything. Just accept that you are accepted."

A few months after my conversion experience had begun, and I'd been regularly attending Grace Lutheran Church in San Diego, Pastor Widmann asked me one day when I was going to be baptized. I was surprised by his question, and I told him so. He asked why, and I said, "Well, I don't think I'm ready." He asked me to explain what I meant, and I tried to articulate it, saying, "Well, I thought you had to be further along than I am, that my faith has to be stronger, that I have to a better person....." in other words, that I had to be something other and/or more than what I was right then. And Pastor Widmann said to me, "Jeri, sit down and let me tell you about God's grace." I was baptized the following Saturday - on that day, because he was leaving on vacation that afternoon.

And it's in baptism, Lutherans believe, that we are given the new life in Jesus Christ, life eternal, the life that will never die. As Paul says, also in Romans, we are joined to Jesus' death on the cross, and with that, the old person who is in rebellion against God, who doesn't want to need God's grace, is put to death, and the new person is born (Romans 6: 3-11). And in this is another key piece of Lutheran theology, that we are *simul iustus et peccator*, meaning simultaneously justified (made right with God) even while we are still sinful.

Lutheran spirituality is ultimately about walking the way of the cross, I believe, giving ourselves over to being crucified with Christ over and over - that we must walk straight through pain and suffering, rather than try to go around it, because only in death and dying does the new life in Christ get born - letting go of all of our own constructs to try to make things better, and trusting simply and plainly that God's grace is

good enough. As Paul reports in 2 Corinthians, he asked, begged, pleaded over and over that his affliction be taken away. And the answer was, "My grace is sufficient for you." The old self's response to that is, "Is that all?!" But the new self, the self that lives in faith in God's grace in Christ, says, "Yes, yes, God's grace is good enough. Thanks be to God!"

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### **THE GRACE OF THE DESERT by John Franklin**

In all our journeying with Christ, the initiative belongs to God. The Spirit will lead us where we need to go if we make the choice to follow.

It is hard to appreciate this when after romping in green pastures we find ourselves in the dark valley of the desert. With no pastureland in sight, and no evidence of water, quiet or otherwise (Ps 23), we can stagger along echoing Thomas' complaint, "Lord, we do not know where you are going, so how can we know the way!" (John 14:5).

The assumption is that you are lost. Outwardly everything may be fine. You sound articulate when you speak of God, there is grace when you listen and pray with people, and God seems to bless your endeavours. But within, there is a dry restlessness, a weary boredom and not uncommonly, a subversive fear suggesting that despite the plea of Psalm 51, God has cast you from his presence and taken his spirit from you.

#### **Four Temptations**

Common reactions to this experience really amount to temptations.

There is the temptation to pretend that everything is fine, to carry on as usual in the hope that some good solid work and a bit more prayer, scripture, sleep and exercise will fix whatever is wrong with you. And there is always the book that just might have the answer. But pretending only increases the strain.

William Cowper in his doleful hymn, "O for a closer walk with God", pines for the "blessedness I knew when first I saw the Lord". The temptation here is to return to the beginning. The illusory hope is that if I do all the things I used to do, then the streams will flow again and I will feel better. But the old songs, the old scriptures and the old prayer patterns and worship styles may only increase the weariness.

Another temptation is to go foraging around for some new experiences that will startle the deadness out of you. Every stone in the desert could indeed be bread if only you can find the right formula to transform them.

Less active is the temptation to despair and poor me can let the disciplines of prayer, scripture and sharing of oneself in community life slacken off. There is sometimes a hidden touch of bargaining with God, "I'll come back again if you give me satisfaction and make it worth my while".

What then is going on? You want to pray but you can't. Boredom, dissatisfaction and frustration taint everything. The light and warmth of the fervor you once enjoyed seems to have gone.

Obviously enough, sin, weakness, and laziness can be a straight path into the desert. Even physical or emotional stress can take their toll. In all these cases, confession, repentance and prayer for help and healing are appropriate and often transforming. But what I am speaking of here is quite different.

#### **Longing**

What I am trying to describe is the desert that the Spirit himself has led us into. And the sure sign that it is the Spirit, is the even vague realisation that it is God alone who can fulfil us. Despite everything, we find it is him we want. We echo the Psalmist,

"Whom have I in heaven but you?

And being with you, I desire nothing on earth". Ps 73:25

What is going on then, is that God himself is giving us opportunity to clarify and purify our choice for him. Quite simply, the desert is both normal and necessary. If we would move beyond the beginnings, we can expect the desert. We can learn to bless it, whether we are there for a mere forty days or forty months!

We can learn to bless it whether it is an unwelcome new experience or something that has a vague feeling of having 'been here before'.

The desert is a place of grace and transformation that has a blessedness and beauty of its own. While we may be stripped of pleasant feelings, and all feelings of religious satisfaction, God has not deserted us. We learn to trust him rather than our feelings about him. We cannot 'feel' God anyway. God is so big that 'feeling' God would destroy us. At best we feel our own selves as we respond to evidences of his presence. But our feelings and the faithful presence of God are not in the end equitable. We need to learn that if we are to grow.

It will be clear then that running back to the beginning or whipping up some new experience is inappropriate. What is appropriate, or rather necessary, is faith, faithfulness and love.

### **Disciplines**

Hold fast to your faith that the initiative is God's. It is God who has brought you to the desert (Hosea 2:14) and he will not abandon you to die there. He cares enough to lead you through. The way may be hard and painful as it is the place of stripping. But continue to choose him in all things and abandon yourself utterly to his grace. You will experience the blessedness of the poor in spirit.

And be faithful. Pray, for that is always a choice for God, a strengthening of the will toward him. Read the scriptures even if outwardly they do not seem to touch you. The work of grace is often deeper than thought or feeling. Give of yourself, even if you feel there is no one home.

And love. Above all, this discipline must not be neglected. Love is a choice, a choice for God's way, a choice for God. Here we learn to love with the love that God himself has for others. God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit and it is ours to continue to cooperate with that love. In so doing, the poverty of our own love is plainly revealed. But also revealed is the sufficiency of God's love. While the way may continue to be hard and our corner of the community of faith not the easiest to live with, if we have no love we have gained nothing.

### **Grace**

Throughout our journey we may have a variety of religious experiences. They may seem wonderful and even transforming but in themselves they are nothing. They are not God per se. They are our experiences. While valid and valuable in their own way, they are only tastes of what our long-dormant spiritual faculties are capable of doing and perceiving when awakened by the Holy Spirit. From beginning to end the only test of holiness, the only authentic sign of our being in Christ, is love. To teach us that, much of our experience will largely dry up.

In the desert then thoughts, experience, imagination and even words may dry up but paradoxically, our desire for God, and God alone, sharpens and intensifies. Though he seems absent, we cannot live without him. Though we feel nothing much at all, we find ourselves utterly dependent upon him.

The desert then, faith's ancestors have told us, is a fruitful place. If the Spirit has a mind to send us there, we will find with Jesus that there are no detours or short cuts (Luke 4:1-12). We will be there for as long as God's good providence deems necessary. If we do not run away, or passively abandon God, we will taste the fruit of insights that no amount of study can produce. If we are willing to trust and endure some growing pains, we will come to greater maturity and occupy more of that space that is the stature of Christ (Eph. 4:13). By the Spirit, we are led to places that we cannot go to by our own efforts.

Above all, a sojourn in the desert teaches us of a goodness, faithfulness and love that surpasses knowledge; that even in poverty we may be filled with the fullness of God. This is grace.

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### **PUTTING MYSELF IN THE WAY OF GRACE** *by Rosemary Blackwell*

Recently I found myself exploring the connection between grace and effort in relation to the faith journey. Initially it seemed to me that both grace and effort are required in the spiritual life, maybe even in equal doses - grace as from God and pure gift, and effort on my part in being diligent in exercising the spiritual disciplines.

It wasn't until I woke up the next morning that I saw more clearly the relationship between faith and works, or grace and effort. In the light of this it now seems to me that the contemplative way is more about spending effort in putting myself in the stream of God's grace, which changes me, inspiring and informing my efforts and works.

This discovery then raised further questions: "How do we get this grace", and/or "How do we put ourselves in the way of grace?". In living out a vocation as a singular religious that commits me to a regular routine of prayer, I am reminded of the importance of the relational dimension in all of this. That grace and effort come out of a relationship of love in God, with love holding these two in delicate tension, and that prayer is the means to this relationship. At a recent Religious Life Conference I was particularly taken with a quote Fr Michael Casey, a Cistercian monk at Tarrawarra Abbey NSW, took from one of Dom John Chapman's spiritual letters:

*The only way to pray is to pray; and the way to pray well is to pray much. If one has no time for this, then one must at least pray regularly. But the less one prays, the worse it goes.*

Prayer in general is a main means to and means of grace, and there are many different kinds of prayer and ways of praying. But what constitutes prayer and where does prayer begin and end? I suppose that what is important in all of this is finding ways that connect you and me into grace and there are many ways. One of these ways is suggested by the term *the grace of the sacraments*. The sacrament of the Eucharist, for example, engages those of a sacramental tradition in Christ's saving actions, and along with the liturgy of the word, nourishes and causes us to re-member the truth we know and yet continue to grow in.

God's act of creation, the world in which we live and move and have our being, is shot through with grace, and to contemplate it is to share God's delight in creation and to participate in its continual unfolding. Hence the term *recreation*.

It seems that the more I dig for grace, the more I find myself wallowing in grace anyway! There is no escape from it, and do I want to escape from it anyway? Grace, glorious grace!

But there is just one small problem with all of this. The reason I explored this supervision issue in the first place was that I found myself resisting this wonderful grace, and resisting it big time. Of course, spiritual directors and supervisors know that this could mean something hugely positive - that grace is deeply at work and that the natural psychological response is to resist it! The gem that I took away with me from that supervision session was the idea and revelation that grace is the opposite of effort and therefore so radical that our egos avoid catching the vision! (And as a gentle aside, I thought I heard a little whisper from the wings say: *Checkmate! Gotcha!*)

The biblical passage I found to connect with all of this was:

Isaiah 12:2-3

*Surely God is my salvation: I will trust, and will not be afraid, for the Lord God is my strength and my might; he has become my salvation. With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation.*

Such treasures of scripture can connect us into the wonderful truths of grace, and as we encounter the spirit beneath the words, we can be opened to the refreshing, sustaining, renewing wellsprings of grace.

### **MEETING GRACE AGAIN FOR THE FIRST TIME** by *Christine Renner*

In his book *What's So Amazing About Grace?*, Philip Yancey uses stories and experiences to discuss this wonderful quality that it is the Church's privilege to share with the world. He chose this method in an effort to give life to a concept that can be elusive and hard to grasp. A quarter of the way through the book, he attempts a 'definition of grace in relation to God'.

*Grace means there is nothing we can do to make God love us more . . .*

*And grace means there is nothing we can do to make God love us less. . . .*

*Grace means that God already loves us as much as an infinite God can possibly love.<sup>1</sup>*

But it is not all good news. As in much of his writing, Yancey is exploring ideas he is learning on his spiritual journey and he has experienced a lot of what he calls 'ungrace' from fellow Christians and churches. He says, *As I look back on my own pilgrimage . . . I see now that what pulled me along was my search for grace. I rejected the church for a time because I found so little grace there. I returned because I found grace nowhere else.<sup>2</sup>* Yancey reflects on his early church experiences which were governed more by rules and do's and dont's than by love. But there were Christians in his life who conveyed the grace of God, and he says *I learned grace by being graced.<sup>3</sup>*

When this book was published in 1997, many people recognised what Yancey was writing about. So many of us know the word 'grace'; we can sing about 'Amazing Grace'; but we have had little experience of it.

I am very thankful for my Christian heritage which has given me a great foundation for life. Yet if I was to describe my early years of growing up in a Christian home, regularly attending Sunday School and Church, a sense of grace would not feature very much. Rather, I can remember disputes over doctrine, and

disagreements over who was 'in' or 'out' of fellowship based on interpretation of Scripture. What one believed dictated acceptance, followed closely by certain standards of behaviour and dress.

I never rejected the church, probably because I was too afraid! I was a mousy little kid; nondescript, timid, clinging. In such an atmosphere I was afraid to break any rules. My father in his earnestness to please God became a dedicated Bible student and wrote booklets promoting what he believed to be sound doctrine. I can remember his concern when I broke one of the rules - I prayed aloud at a prayer meeting, something not allowed by his code. Women were meant to be silent. Anxious to please my father, and in an effort to please God, I fell into line on this issue and on many others.

Ungrace reigned.

Ungrace reigned in my life for years. Sadly, not having experienced much grace, I became part of the problem, continuing the cycle by dispensing ungrace myself. I grew older, and supposedly wiser but my timid, anxious inner child was lurking behind the facade I presented.

Then an encounter with God changed everything. On a retreat, in a way beyond my knowing and understanding, I sensed God speak to me. As I responded then, and over the next days, weeks, and months, God's grace began a work of healing and integration within me, and the growth of my true inner self took place.

I began to experience what Philip Yancey means when he says that *religious faith - for all its problems, despite its maddening tendency to replicate ungrace - lives on because we sense the numinous beauty of a gift undeserved that comes at unexpected moments from Outside.*<sup>4</sup> Meeting 'the God of all grace' like this was indeed an undeserved gift; a gift I will take the rest of my life to unwrap.

Discovering the unconditional love of God in personal experience taught me how to take apart the bars of the rational prison I had lived in for so long. God's grace showed me that being accepted had nothing to do with 'getting it right'. In fact, much of the behaviour I had adopted thinking it was what God wanted from me, was shown to be more about pleasing others. The sense of God's acceptance gave me courage to challenge rules, to pray over my choices and to attempt to do what God wanted, even when it upset people around me. For someone like me, that was a risky but significant step forward.

Knowing myself to be accepted by God, has made it much easier to accept myself. What a relief that is! I am much more aware of my weaknesses and failings, yet know that I don't have to sort myself out in order to be loved. In fact it would be such a huge project, I am astonished that I once believed I had the power to do it. God's unconditional love is also tough. My growth does not come through pleasing myself, or indulgence. It comes by surrender to God, and obedience; attitudes which I have discovered to be the path to true freedom.

I find it can also be costly to offer grace to others. How much easier it is to offer advice (or is it criticism?), than to wait, to pray and to do what I can to facilitate the meeting of others with God himself. What a delight it is though, to see how God reaches out to others. God's ways are so much more creative than mine, touching directly the issues that I haven't been able to see, and thus being truly re-creating and life-giving.

I love the Max Lucado children's story, 'You Are Special.'<sup>5</sup> Punchinello was one of the Wemmicks, small wooden people carved by a woodworker called Eli. They had a practice of sticking stickers on each other. Golden stars were for the talented and beautiful ones. Gray dots were given to the dull and shabby ones. Punchinello had so many gray dots, he would get more simply because he had so many. He was ashamed to go outside, always afraid he'd just collect more dots.

One day he met another Wemmick who was just wooden, with no stickers at all. Whenever someone tried to put one on her, it just fell off. She told Punchinello her secret was to sit in the workshop with Eli each day, so he set off to see for himself.

Much to the little Wemmick's surprise his maker welcomed him warmly and assured him he was special, and that the dots didn't mean a thing to Eli - what mattered was that Punchinello was Eli's own creation. When he asked how to prevent the stickers staying on him, he was told "The stickers only stick if they matter to you. The more you trust my love, the less you care about the stickers." Eli said it would take time because he has so many marks, and invited Punchinello to visit each day in order to be reminded how much he was loved. "Remember," Eli said as the Wemmick walked out of the door, "you are special because I made you." Punchinello didn't stop, but in his heart he thought, *I think he really means it.* And when he did, a dot fell to the ground.'

Philip Yancey tells of receiving a postcard from a friend that had just six words: *I am the one Jesus loves.*<sup>6</sup> That sounds like grace to me.

- 1 Philip Yancey, *What's So Amazing About Grace?*, Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1997, p 70
- 2 *Ibid*, p16
- 3 *Ibid*, p42
- 4 *Ibid*, p 40
- 5 Max Lucado, *You Are Special*, Crossway Books, Wheaton, Illinois, 1997

### GRACE MAKES BEAUTY OUT OF UGLY THINGS by Warren Deason

Alongside the lyrics for each song in the liner notes for U2's best selling year 2000 album, *All that you can't leave behind*, there's a small icon. *Elevation* has a lift. *Walk on*, a tribute to political prisoner Aung San Suu Kyi, carries Amnesty International's logo, *Peace on earth*, a Christmas tree. *Grace* has the descending dove: the symbol of the Holy Spirit.

When Bono and The Edge sang *I still haven't found what I'm looking for* in U2's 1987 *Joshua Tree* album, conservative Christians balked. Had the Dublin lads given away their faith? Yet in an interview recorded a few years ago, lead singer and lyricist Bono is reported to have said,

"It's a powerful idea, grace. It really is. We hear so much of karma and so little of grace. Every religion teaches about karma and what you put out you will receive. And even Christianity, which is supposed to be about grace, has turned redemption into good manners, or the right accent, or good works, or whatever. I just can't get over grace."

Bono certainly hasn't got over grace and "she" is personified in his song that beautifully captures the heart of it.

She transcends "whatever goes around comes around". She dances lightly over our harsh assessments and judgements of ourselves and others.

"She finds goodness in everything. She makes beauty of ugly things!"

In April Of 2001, one of Bono's friends, New York rocker Joey Ramone died. That same evening at a concert in Portland, Bono sang as a tribute, an unaccompanied rendition of the old John Newton hymn *Amazing Grace*. It was reported that a large number of a crowd joined in, in what one member of the crowd described as, "true magic".

Let Bono sing of his own love affair with Grace:

Grace

She takes the blame  
She covers the shame  
Removes the stain  
It could be her name

Grace

It's a name for a girl  
It's also a thought that  
Changed the world  
And when she walks on the street  
You can hear the strings  
Grace finds goodness  
In everything

Grace

She's got the walk  
Not on a wrapper on chalk  
She's got the time to talk  
She travels outside  
Of karma, karma  
She travels outside  
Of karma  
When she goes to work  
You can hear the strings  
Grace finds beauty  
In everything

Grace

She carries a world on her hips  
 No champagne flute for her lips  
 No twirls or skips  
 Between her fingertips  
 She carries a pearl  
 In perfect condition  
 What once was hers  
 What once was friction  
 What left a mark  
 No longer stains  
 Because grace makes beauty  
 Out of ugly things  
 Grace finds beauty  
 In everything  
 Grace finds goodness  
 In everything

### **THE SHEKINAH** by *Doug Riddle*

The next months were difficult for me. As a minister I had shared with so many people in their bereavements but this was different. It was personal to me. The pain and sense of loss, even of destitution, were more acute than I would have anticipated. Nothing seemed to matter any more. Feeling like this I found it specially difficult to conduct the Sunday services. It was not that I had lost my faith but I just felt flat. I suppose it was depression. Now I refer to that period as my dust and ashes time.

Then quite unexpectedly came the most wonderful experience of my life. I was conducting a Communion service. It was at the end of the monsoon and a hot humid day. The thirteen fans in the body of the church were blowing the hot air up into the chancel. The three-metre communion table was spread with a white satin cloth.

On it was a beautiful silver communion set which had been presented by Bishop Voight in memory of his wife. He was an American Methodist bishop who visited us while the church was under construction. The set consisted of a beautiful chalice and two towers of round stacked cup trays, surmounted by lids with crosses on their tops. The base structure was brass which had been copper plated and then silver plated. The result was a deep rich gleam. The set formed a focal point in the chancel and the congregation were rightly proud of it.

As I started the words of the Institution I became aware that the tablecloth was getting brighter. My first thought was that I was going to faint, and that at all costs I must avoid that. Then it was so bright that I could no longer see the words in the order book. That didn't matter, as I know them by heart so could continue the service. Next the brilliance increased and blotted out the congregation and filled the chancel. It was a brighter radiance than I had experienced. Then I sensed it was the presence of the Lord. My first reaction was a feeling of awe, like Jacob's when he awoke from his dream and said, "How awesome is this place". This was followed by a sense of my utter unworthiness, like Isaiah in the Temple, who cried, "Woe is me, for I am a man of unclean lips." Then came a wonderful feeling of being enveloped in God's love, which brought assurance and joy. The brilliance faded, but this assurance has persisted down through the years.

I am a practical person, not much given to mysticism. I know this experience was not a subjective one. It came from beyond me. It was an objective reality. Paul who encountered the "glory of the Lord" so acutely on the Damascus road, and was blinded by it, preached the gospel of the glory of Christ (2 Cor. 4:4) because God had made the light to shine out of darkness, "to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ". It was "the Lord of Glory" who had made his presence real to me. While it was taking place I had managed to keep going with the words of the communion service. Afterwards I asked the elders who were assisting if they had experienced anything. They replied that apart from a rather long pause, when they thought I had lost the place, they had not noticed anything unusual. I was dumbfounded to find that the experience was limited to me. Subsequently I have come to know that it was an experience of the "shekinah".

This word is used in the Rabbinic writings as a circumlocution to express the reverent nearness of God to his people. The root meaning of the Hebrew word is "that which dwells". It is referred to as "the glory of the Lord" and indicates the presence of God. It designates God himself in his earthly dwelling. Since the time of Moses and the burning bush it has been a well known experience down through the ages.

From *Life and Light*  
by Douglas Milne Riddle.  
Published privately. P. 151-2

### **ORANGE / ORANGE / ORANGE** by *Paul Hepplestone*

I stopped my mini-van beside the estuary. Across fifty metres of pebbly beach was the Ythan river, running strongly to my right. It was low tide and on the far bank the brown mudflats glistened in the bright, warm June sun.

This day was destined to be special right from the start. After all June 6<sup>th</sup> 1966 has a ring about it when you write it as 6.6.66. Date patterns similar to this arise only a few times each century.

The purpose for my being there those long years ago was to study Oystercatchers - large black and white wading birds with a long orange bill and vermilion eyes. They gather around their food supplies in winter - mussel beds, cockle beaches, but in summer they nest in dunes, on beach tide lines and in some areas in surrounding fields. These birds get food for their young from the nearby shore or estuary and I had marked several adults at their nests the previous day in the dune system of the Sands of Forvie National Nature Reserve in north-east Scotland, close to the field station that was my base.

My purpose on 6<sup>th</sup> June was to find where my marked birds from the dunes were feeding on the mudflats and mussel beds of the nearby estuary; for that purpose I had marked them with rings on the leg and a wing-tag on each wing, which had a combination of colours so that each bird was marked individually. These were the first birds I had ever marked.

I got out my binoculars and scanned the far shore; several Oystercatchers were feeding there together with some Redshank and a solitary Curlew. Moving my sight-line slowly from left to right I saw nothing; no marked bird at all. I was disappointed, for this was the last place I was to search and it began to look as though none of my marked birds had come to the shore that afternoon. I would just have to repeat the observations tomorrow, when the tide was low once again.

But I decided to give it one final glance before turning for home and that's when she flew in. With a shrill call the Oystercatcher landed on the mudflat and started feeding immediately. Good enough, but what took my breath away was that this one was marked.

Of the nine I had tagged this was the first I had seen subsequently. It was a helpful piece of information for it helped to piece together the jigsaw which is the feeding behaviour of a wild bird. But the reason that it took my breath away was this : I was looking for the first time at a wild bird that I knew as an individual. For years I had studied these birds and many others; they were all Snipe, or Gannets, Wrens or whatever. Here was 'just' an Oystercatcher, but one that I knew in an intimate way; I had held it 20 hours earlier, measured it, gazed in wonder at its crimson eyes and the beautiful formation of the feathers. I had watched its head remain absolutely static as I moved its body in my hand - altogether a wonderful example of divine engineering.

I lowered my binoculars briefly. Yes I could see the bird with my naked eyes across the water, its colour wing-tag combination as distinctive as the date - *Orange/Orange/Orange*.

So more than knowing it as separate from the others around, I could give my bird a name. I stayed watching O-O-O for an hour till she flew back to the dunes; I had fallen into a kind of meditation and the thoughts that whirled around my head were simple but profound – that each of us is known and loved and valued and named as a unique individual by God. He marked us out even before we were born; our name is carved on his hand. He has followed us and accompanied us every step of our journey; he has held us in his arms and marvelled at our features, even the little crinkly bits of our face or personality. For he intentionally made us exactly as we are; he designed our bodies, our minds and spirits to serve him in ways impossible for anyone else. We are made unique, reflecting the creativity of God in all its perfection. And above all these, God has a love for us in ways far beyond our understanding.

O-O-O will have died by now, but to me she's immortal - just as we, as unique God-created individuals, are immortal in the vastness of eternity. We are held, named, loved, made whole - and marked out for ever as belonging to him.

### **GLIMPSES OF GRACE** by *Sue Pickering*

Many of us find the prospect of a pillow ready to receive our heavy heads at the end of a full day appealing. But, if we get into bed and turn off the light, settling at once into the softness of sleep, we are losing an opportunity to glimpse moments of grace woven within the day.

For centuries Christians have paused at the end of each day to reflect - however briefly - on what has happened during their waking hours. They have spent time considering where and how God has connected with their lived experience of work, play, relationships, decisions, celebrations, interior questioning, pain and joy.

St Ignatius of Loyola, whom we remember as the founder of the Jesuit Order and the writer of the Spiritual Exercises, was a strong advocate of this practice, encouraging others in regular, intentional, evening reflection which he called the 'Examen'. In its simplest form, this process helps us attend to the 'consolations' and 'desolations' in our lives, 'the interior movements through which divine revelation unfolds'.<sup>1</sup> As we pause to consider our responses to the day's events, we learn to recognise those things which give us life and energy or which sap our strength; we acknowledge the relationships with which we struggle and we celebrate those that are life-giving; we name those feelings which drive us away from God or which draw us into God's embrace.

The Linns, in their helpful book on the Examen *'Sleeping with Bread - holding what gives you life'*, tell a story from the second world war:

*During the bombing raids of World War II, thousands of children were orphaned and left to starve. The fortunate ones were rescued and placed in refugee camps where they received food and good care. But many of these children who had lost so much could not sleep at night. They feared waking up to find themselves once again homeless and without food. Nothing seemed to reassure them. Finally, someone hit upon the idea of giving each child a piece of bread to hold at bedtime. Holding their bread, these children could finally sleep in peace. All through the night the bread reminded them, "Today I ate and I will eat again tomorrow."<sup>2</sup>*

Although we may not be faced with the same depths of material or emotional deprivation as the orphans in the story, nevertheless we too can be nourished, reassured, and calmed as we recognise God's gifts of grace each day.

To get started with the Examen, set aside five to fifteen minutes each evening - at a time and place that fits naturally with your daily routine. The examen can be done alone, with family members or with a small community of friends.

- sit comfortably; light a candle as a symbol of the light of Christ present with you to guide, strengthen and inform your reflection; some people find music helps them to settle and focus
- use a gesture to incarnate your intention - eg place your hand over your heart or hold your palms upwards - rest in that position for a few seconds asking God to be with you as you consider the events of the day
- ask for God or Jesus through the Holy Spirit to help you be honest about your thoughts and feelings, even if this process produces a holy challenge
- Use one or two of the pairs of questions listed below as a focus for your reflection -
  - What glimpses of grace have I seen today?
  - When have I felt connected/disconnected from God today?
  - ( i.e. Where have I been least aware of grace today?)
  - For what moment today am I most grateful?
  - For what moment today am I least grateful?<sup>3</sup>
  - How have I been a bearer of God's grace today?
  - How have I avoided/resisted being a bearer of God's grace today?
  - How have I been aware of others being bearers of grace to me today?
  - How have I been aware of others being barriers to the movement of grace?
- if you want to, use one of the following as a summary question - What aspects of this day might I bring to God for tonight's healing?
  - How has this glimpse of grace affected my way of seeing God?
- so that you can 'hold what gives you life' take a few minutes to write your discoveries in your journal, talk to a friend or family member, make a drawing ( stick figures are just fine), put some colours on the calendar date for today or let God show you another way to keep track of what is being revealed through the examen

For each of us the day's discoveries will be unique, for our God communicates with us according to our personal circumstances. For me 'Glimpses of grace' have included:

receiving unexpected help,

feeling deeply connected with some aspect of creation,  
 difficult days committed to God's keeping in the morning, becoming days of "God-incidences",  
 smooth transitions, spaces cleared, questions answered, opportunities presented,  
 being moved by a song's melody or a film sequence,  
 appreciating the smile of a child or the laughter in their play,  
 being receptive to the leading of the Holy Spirit,  
 being given a new insight into the heart of Jesus,  
 being prompted to make a connection with someone who is lonely,  
 sitting without words beside a dying friend and knowing that the silence is holy.

At times I have been aware of grace:

as a sense of deep peace in the middle of difficult circumstances,  
 as a surprising freedom from anxiety,  
 as a deep acceptance in the midst of moral frailty,  
 as a recognition that a failure no longer matters, for all is gift with God,  
 as reconciliation where there had been division  
 as hope where there had been despair.....

Stopping to reflect each evening brings us gifts from our loving God - gifts which are ready to be unwrapped before we go to sleep. Consistent attention to the interior movements identified during the examen can help us resolve problems, build our confidence in God, release us to be our true selves, free us from fear, and help us to live out our 'sealed orders' - our unique expression of God's image in the world, our own special 'way of giving and receiving love.'<sup>4</sup>

Whether the glimpses of grace are recognised in our outer circumstances or in the inner movements of our souls, together they can gently shape a mosaic of mercy, in which our lived experiences - both joyful and challenging - are hallowed by the God who loves us beyond all reason.

Sleep well!

<sup>1</sup> Linn, Dennis, Sheila Fabricant Linn and Matthew Linn, *Sleeping with Bread - holding what gives you life*, Paulist Press: NY, 1995. p.19

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.* p.1

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.* p.6

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.* 21

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### FILM RETREAT AT MURIWAI by Alan Upson

A word of advice from a novice attending the Muriwai directed, **silent**, wilderness-retreat. Like children going to the toilet before swimming, mature people should go to the dentist before such an event. A large filling broke days before I left, leaving an unsupported cusp. I shall never forget my first breakfast in a silent hall with other retreatees quietly consuming breakfast about me. On my first bite the unsupported cusp broke like the legendary crack of doom. Things had to get better after that, and they did. Following that experience, I did learn to enjoy my meals outside, or play quiet music if I ate in the hall.

The nikau-dominated bush was a real bonus, as were the pine forest and the nearby farm and lake. It took me back to my country upbringing with an added adult awareness of God in nature, all about me. The Muriwai beach that seemed to stretch forever at low tide, the crashing waves and the swirling mists, added to the mystery of the experience. Being self-catering, I suspect that the retreat encouraged applications from people who were able to be self-sufficient. I quickly grew accustomed to living beside people, without having to strike up verbal relationships. With a daily session of direction, I attended wholly to my relationship with God. The daily afternoon communion became a profound experience of silence and grace.

The movies of the first five nights provided a vivid counterbalance. The freedom of time, space and stimulation of the natural bush setting, contrasted strongly with the minutely prepared and purposeful genre of the movie world. There was no chance to escape other's reality at this retreat. I found it difficult to discuss the emotional impact of a movie right after the event, and needed downtime to reflect on what I'd experienced. So did others. Consequently, as was proper at a silent retreat, reflections were shared individually with the director, rather than as a group discussion. One-and-a-half school exercise books of writing give evidence of the rapid changes taking place for me through that week.

Originally I was fulfilling a prerequisite seven-day retreat requirement, before applying to the Spiritual Director Training Programme. I should have known better. The Spirit that led me to the training course, also coaxed (and manipulated) my attendance at this retreat. It was a God-send. It gave me time in my five hour drive there, to come to terms with the fact of doing something that I'd wanted to do forty years before. My fear of silence turned out to be simply a fear of the unknown and I took to it like a Tui to Kowhai nectar. The headlong rush and demand of Parish ministry evaporated in the novel setting and programme. My spiritual growth accelerated while it seemed that my time there, was as endless as the beach that stretched out of sight. Over the week, a Wesleyan type experience of blinkers being removed, eyes and ears opened, brought me back to myself and God. What's more, it has lasted and is with me as I write, as well as in the very pressured place and lifestyle that led me to consider a radical change in my ministry. I'll certainly use my annual study week in a similar way next year. What puzzles me most though, is the question of how I have survived twenty five years as a minister without the benefit of this kind of re-awakening. God only knows.

### PSALM 139

You and me, Lord God.

You are the knower, and I am known.

Who am I, that you are mindful of me?

Who are we, that we are the focus of your so searching attention?

What makes you occupy yourself with such intricate detail?

How is it we are the subject of such penetrating gaze?

Lord God, your probing, your thorough discernment of our being, gives us confidence:

- we are taken deeply seriously

- worth the careful examination

- valued in spite of, because of

all our actions, thoughts, hopes, idiosyncrasies.

Completely known?

God, how can you?

How do you know what questions to ask? what to observe in us?

Unless you are one who knows your self;

Unless you have made a thorough introspection

- perhaps knows what thoughts we are both capable of

- what ways we might both explore

- what variety of words we may both utter:

You are the knower; we are the discoverers;

You are the One who nourishes genuine developing and fond relationship;

And you are the One who pushed us beyond knowing, toward the wonder of "I am with you"

- our only certainty.

In the name of One known to us, Jesus Christ

AMEN

From *Grant us your Peace* by David Grant. P. 76. See Books below.

### SPIRITUAL DIRECTION RESEARCH PAPER

**Resistance in Pastors to Spiritual Direction** by Jane Wilkinson.

This excellent paper is available on our website [www.sgm.org.nz/research\\_papers](http://www.sgm.org.nz/research_papers) and from Carole Hunt in hard copy (NZ\$6.00): Email: [sgm@clear.net.nz](mailto:sgm@clear.net.nz)

### REVIEWS

#### **BETWEEN NOON AND THREE: Romance, Law, and the Outrage of Grace**

by Robert Farrar Capon

(1997 Paperback Edition: Eerdmans Publishing, Grand Rapids)

A Reflective Book Review by Jo White

Robert Farrar Capon's book, *Between Noon and Three : Romance, Law, and the Outrage of Grace*, is a "rich, risky and risque" read, to quote my spiritual director. I was actually staying at the Oasis Retreat

Centre for a silent retreat when I snuck into their bookshop and began secretly reading this provocative book.

Published in its originally conceived three-part entirety, *Between Noon and Three* opens with an adulterous 'Parable' (to use Capon's title), that lays out law and grace for all to see. In Part Two, Capon invites the reader to the 'Coffee Hour', where you sit around and charge him with the theological questions that Part One has raised for you. And in Part Three, 'The Youngest Day', Capon serves us up another jarring short story, this time about a mafia execution. Sounds intriguing? You can imagine why I was distracted. It's like Mills & Boon meets JI Packer. Only steamier.

The characters, Capon and the engaged reader wrestle together in the love-tryst of their lives - for their very lives. I was totally struck by Capon's translation of Romans 5:8 "But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us, on the condition that after a reasonable length of time, we would be the kind of people no one would ever have had to die for in the first place. Otherwise, the whole deal is off" (p96). I slipped it into conversation with Christian friends for weeks afterwards, but only one reacted, saying "Hold on. That doesn't sound quite right".

The liberty that I found, as I imitated Capon, and engaged with God in imaginatively realising my worst fears in the light of death-defying grace, was like stepping off the wing of an aeroplane, falling, falling and finding myself flying. The exhilaration of knowing myself still loved - and that Christ knows Christ loves me - frees me to choose. This is fear-binding grace that liberates for love.

More than theologically challenging, Capon brings grace up-close-and-personal. Watch out if you read it! It might just undress you!

### **SACRED COMPANIONS: The Gift of Spiritual Friendship and Direction**

by Dr David Benner - published by IVP - 2002

Reviewed by Aynsley Mackie

In 2004 Dr. David Benner and his wife Juliete came to New Zealand as guest speakers at the Christian Counsellors Conference, with a Retreat day following. It was a most worthwhile time and everyone who met the Benners found them to be winsome, lovely people. David is a Doctor of Clinical Psychology and a committed Christian who seeks to blend the spiritual and psychological. His wife Juliete is a Spiritual Director and has worked as a Docent in Art Galleries in Hamilton, Canada. He has written numerous books and is co-editor of the Journal *Conversations* reviewed in the Summer 2004-5 Refresh.

*Sacred Companions* has its roots deeply in the life and spiritual journey of the Benners. Together they have explored avenues of spiritual growth, have shared their gained experiences with friends, in groups and with clients and more widely through this book. It is exciting and challenging, thought provoking and stimulating.

David Benner writes, "What I have learned about spiritual friendship and direction comes first and foremost from my experience of journeying with my own spiritual friends. I have been richly blessed by my exposure to spiritual direction through personal experiences of receiving it, through reading, and a modest amount of training, and by a number of years of offering it to others. These experiences have not made me an expert. They have, however, fuelled my passion for spiritual companionship. It is on that basis that I write this book. Amateurs do what they do out of passion. This precisely describes my feelings about the enormous value of the gift of spiritual friendship and direction. If the church is to be restored to its rightful place of relevance to and pre-eminence in supporting the care and cure of souls, we must equip and encourage people to offer themselves to others in relationships of soul friendship and spiritual companionship".

This book will appeal to all seeking to develop deeper spiritual friendships, to those wanting to understand the concept of spiritual direction and explore new areas of relating to others. Each chapter of *Sacred Companions* ends with a number of thoughtful questions which could be used in a study group situation.

### **THE PILGRIM CARDS: A Resource for Pilgrims**

by Alan Repath

Reviewed by Andrew Pritchard

In the Pilgrim Cards Austin Repath, shares reflections and questions that arose from his experience of pilgrimage. Repath, a Canadian, has walked pathways and searched the inner path in many places including Iona, Rome and particularly in the three times he has walked the ancient pilgrim's route, El Camino de Santiago in Spain.

What he offers in The Pilgrim Cards is a boxed set of 54 cards, each presenting an experience or theme pilgrims may encounter on the outer and inner journey. I found the reflections easy to relate to and they readily evoked material for my own reflection and prayer.

The visual design of the cards was, for me their least attractive aspect. Having first browsed Repath's web site [www.pilgrimcards.com](http://www.pilgrimcards.com), which is easy on the eye, using colour and texture well, I was expecting the cards to look the same. In fact they are starkly black and white which I found much less attractive. Also, having occasionally seen a late night TV advertisement for Tarot readings prompts an unfortunate association for me in terms of cards that look about the same size as those on the advertisement! These visual limitations though do not stop me from benefiting from the reflections and finding the Pilgrim Cards personally useful.

This resource is best used contemplatively ... reading slowly, engaging the imagination, using the senses, feeling the emotions. For those who have engaged in physical pilgrimage the cards provide a helpful means of reawakening their own experiences and inviting renewed reflection and integration with their current experience of the inner journey. For those who have not pilgrimaged physically the themes and metaphors can helpfully illuminate and deepen inner experience.

See [www.pilgrimcards.com](http://www.pilgrimcards.com) for details of how to order.

### **THE HEART OF CHRISTIANITY: Rediscovering a Life of Faith, How we can be Passionate Believers Today**

by Marcus J. Borg 2003, HarperSanFrancisco

ISBN 0-06-052676-9

Reviewed by Jenny Harrison

We all know that we should not judge a book by its cover but seeing the comments of six favourite authors on the cover of this book made it seem like a 'must-read'! It is one of those disarmingly simple books that engaged me from the Preface. Who among us has not asked as Borg does in the first few lines: "What is the heart of Christianity? What does it mean to be a Christian today?"

Borg writes in a fluid, available way and constructs his propositions leaving room for his readers to find a place to form their own stance. While as scholarly as his other books, this one seems more urgent, more direct and, as one of my fellow readers in the parish reading group observed: "there a fewer footnotes. It is as though he is writing from his heart as well as his head." Borg seems to be sharing HIS heart of faith with us, his readers. He suggests that we are living in the midst of change in the Christian Church and names some of the distinctive issues that are currently divisive within the church. He reflects that there appear to be two distinct paradigms: an earlier paradigm and an emerging paradigm. While Borg is clearly in the emerging paradigm, he sets up a way of languaging and experiencing both that is, on the whole, respectful. He summarises the major differences within the following four areas

- The Bible's origin
- Biblical Interpretation
- The Bible's function
- The Christian life emphasis

and accepts that in discussing these, the two paradigms are often hostile towards each other:

The first half of the book explores and expands the paradigms under the headings "Faith", "The Bible", "God" and "Jesus". The chapter on "Faith" is particularly illuminating as he describes faith as *assensus*, *fiducia*, *fidelitas* and *visio* - using scripture and history to expand understanding of our own faith as well as the faith of the church. The chapter on "God" recognises the unique understanding each of us brings to our God-language and how often we misunderstand each other's conversations about God.

The second part of the book explores how we live the Christian life today - especially those of us trying to live this life with an emerging understanding. The chapter headings, again, offer a framework for this exploration. He re-visions what it means to be 'born again' and names growth in love and compassion as the fruits of this new birth. He describes the 'kingdom of God' as pointing to God's passion for justice in the world and urges believers to a politically engaged spirituality. He challenges us to live with open hearts, mindful of the sacred places and times of life, actively seeking to find holiness in our world. He thinks about sin and salvation and the transforming power of forgiveness and grace. He describes Christianity as being about paying attention to God, intentionally forming character, nourishing and being nourished, committed to compassion and justice and living the 'way' of Jesus. And he recommends that we practice what we preach.

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## RESOURCES

### Websites

InterVarsity Library website has all sorts of papers related to spiritual growth and development.

<http://www.regions.ivcf.org/prayer>

[www.beyondlight.com/gallery.html](http://www.beyondlight.com/gallery.html) Albert Koetsier's art using xrays of things natural. A useful site for reflection on the intrinsic art of the natural world

[www.pilgrimcards.com](http://www.pilgrimcards.com). Austin Repath's site for cards to assist reflection on pilgrimage. See review above.

[www.targetti.com/arte](http://www.targetti.com/arte) An architectural lighting company has established an art collection that uses light in creative ways.

[www.wcom.org](http://www.wcom.org) World Community for Christian Meditation. In NZ the international Newsletter long with information on meditation events within the NZ Community for Christian Meditation is distributed by Stan Martin at [stanman@xtra.co.nz](mailto:stanman@xtra.co.nz)

## Books

Eve Baker. **Paths in Solitude**. Discusses the invitation to silence and solitude and offers encouragement to those leading a solitary life today. St Pauls Press, UK. ISBN 085439 513x 5.95 Pounds.

Michael Casey. **Towards God**.  
Dove 1995. The Western tradition of contemplation.

K.M. George. **The Silent Roots**. Orthodox perspectives on Christian spirituality. WCC Publications. 1994. 81pp. \$18.95.

David Grant. **Grant Us Your Peace**.  
Prayers from the Lectionary Psalms. Chalice Press. St Louis, Missouri. 1998. pp190.  
Prayers for Worship. Available from the author, 24 Gerontius Lane, Snells Beach. 1241. \$40.00

Gary W.Moon and David G. Benner. **Spiritual Direction and the care of Souls: A Guide to Christian Approaches and Practices**. Intervarsity Press. 2004. 254pp. US\$19.00.

Henri Nouwen. **Peacework**.  
127pp 2005. \$37.50. Written 20 years ago as a response to the tensions of the Cold War and printed now for the first time.

Joyce Rupp and Macrina Wiederkehr. **The Circle of Life**. 283pp. \$44.95 Connects experiences of the seas with inner movement and spiritual growth and includes additional written material and music.

Rupert Shortt. **Rowan Williams - An Introduction**. DLT 2003. 131pp.

Wilfrid Stinissen. **Nourished By The Word**. Reading the Bible contemplatively.  
Ligouri Press. 1999. 118pp. \$34.95.

Rowan Williams. **The Dwelling Of The Light: praying with icons of Christ**. Eerdmans 2003

Flora Wuellner. **Enter By The Gate**.  
Upper Room Books 2004. Guidance in hearing God's voice and making decisions.

## Newsletters

**Raven's Bread - Food for Those in Solitude**.  
From: Raven's Bread, 18065 Hwy 209, Hot Springs, NC. 28743. USA  
A 12 page newsletter for solitaries and hermits.

## Fellowship of Solitaries

A regular letter edited by Eve Baker, author of *Paths in Solitude* (see books above), for those on a solitary path of life and prayer. [www.solitaries.org.uk](http://www.solitaries.org.uk) email: [solitaries@onetel.com](mailto:solitaries@onetel.com)

## Libraries

Wellington Institute of Theology Library  
1<sup>st</sup> Floor The Anglican Centre,  
18 Eccleston Hill, Thorndon.  
Ph. 04 4721057 ext 612

Kinder Library,  
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The postal lending service costs \$20.00 on registration from which postage will be deducted (and any fines for overdue books).

**Music****Sounds of Grace.**

CD with words of 15 songs by Titahi Bay Gospel Chapel, Porirua, NZ. Available through [www.tbgc.org.nz](http://www.tbgc.org.nz). Email: [enquiries@tbgc.org.nz](mailto:enquiries@tbgc.org.nz)

**Songs of The Women Mystics** by Briega O'Hare. The two tapes of *Woman's Song of God* and *The God of Love* are now available on one CD with a printed booklet of words titled **Woman's Song of God**, \$47.50 - from Pleroma, Freepost 609 Post Shop, Waipukarau. 0508 988 988

**Company of Angels.**

A Briega O'Hare CD with words booklet is available from Pleroma as above. \$34.95

**Creation Waits.**

This Briega O'Hare CD and words booklet has been around for a few years and is still available from Pleroma for \$45.00. The CD only is \$37.50.

**Songs of Taize. Vols 1 & 2.**

A double CD pack with 25 tracks per CD. Lyrics included. \$39.95 each volume. Available from Pleroma. 0503 988 988

**Sanctuary.**

Trisha Watts and Gabrielle Lord. CD (60 tracks) and word book (220pp) - \$35.00. Prayer resources including prayers, reflective quotes, scripture, music and rituals. 60 original chants. From Pleroma.

**Other Audio Tapes/CDs****Being Led ... into the depths of Meditation.**

A CD compiled by Michael Dougherty which offers exercises and music to aid meditation. \$15.00 (incl. P&P) from Michael Dougherty, Owhiwa Road, RD.1, Onerahi. Whangarei.

**Star in My Heart.**

Joyce Rupp. 2 CD set \$44.50; 2 Cassette set \$33.50. Based on her book on Sophia the feminine face of God from the O.T. Book of Proverbs and other wisdom literature.

**Videos**

A Sacred Trust: Boundary Issues for Clergy and Spiritual Teachers

FaithTrust Institute. Seattle. 2003. 4 videotape series, 22 minutes each video plus a 63 page facilitator guide. US\$300.

**SGM NEWS**

The SGM Programme that is mailed out each year advertises a wide range of retreats, quiet days, workshops and other events. These are run by many different people in locations throughout the country from Northland to Southland. Some events are promoted primarily through SGM networks, others are offered cooperatively by SGM and another organisation, church or parish.

Most of the events offered had an attendance of around 6-8 participants with a few lower and one or two with 18-20 attending. The type of events included quiet days, short retreats, retreat in daily life, workshops and 'series' i.e. a series, usually of evenings once a week on a given theme. A wonderful expression of creativity and being sensitive to the needs of participants from differing backgrounds and circumstances. A significant contribution, resourcing people as they seek to grow with God.

After a couple of years in the planning SGM had a stand in the missions tent at Parachute '05. David Crawley and Jane Wilkinson were the workgroup members involved in planning and setting up the SGM stand. Jeannie Cochrane joined them to help staff the stand over the weekend with Jan Lee, Rosemary Blackwell, Angelika Halsted and Jocelyn Dale providing welcome relief on various days as all stands had to be staffed 8.30am to midnight. In his report to workgroup David wrote, "As expected we didn't attract a lot of interest from the 12-20+ year olds for whom Parachute exists but we had many good conversations with people in the older age groups - parents, day visitors, fellow display holders etc." Many of the people contacted were not previously aware of SGM. Workgroup had a clear sense that a continued presence at Parachute presents a significant opportunity to raise awareness and answer questions concerning contemplative spirituality and we are planning to be there again in 2006.

Many of you will be aware that Clarice Greenslade, a workgroup member and SGM area contact for Canterbury, was unwell through the latter part of 2004. This culminated in significant surgery earlier this year which Clarice came through well. Currently she is receiving chemotherapy. I write this having just

spoken with a positive and cheerful Clarice who reports feeling well, enjoying walking the dog most days and being grateful to be meeting with directees again on a regular basis. Clarice has appreciated and continues to value our love and prayers. Further south Mary Concannon continues to have a keen interest in and concern for the work of SGM, particularly within Otago. She sees some improvement in her condition and she too deeply appreciates the encouragement and prayers from many friends.

The Spiritual Directors' Formation Programme sees some 22 participants in their second year with a new intake of 28 participants in their first year. As part of the programme 30 workshops are run with 18 people being involved in the presentation of these. The workshops take place on a regional basis currently centred on Auckland, Gisborne, Palmerston North and Christchurch. In July a seven-member team will meet with the first year participants for the week long Waikanae training event. In addition to facilitating and managing the programme Sue continues to revise and update the materials used in reading modules and workshops. An additional project for this year is to complete and update a video/CD of the workshops to be used by people who unavoidably miss a workshop and by overseas participants in the programme (two in Australia this year). By the time you receive this, or shortly after a new batch of research papers will be available on the SGM web-site. Remember to check the web-site from time to time. The Programme and copies of Refresh are there and it is a great way to promote what SGM offers to those who are not on our mailing list.

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## CONTRIBUTORS

Rosemary Blackwell is a singular religious and spiritual director living in Hamilton.

Jeannie Cochrane is a spiritual director and a tutor for children with learning disabilities. She lives in Te Atatu South, Auckland.

Warren Deason is pastor of Albany Presbyterian Church and is a member of the SGM Workgroup.

Jeri Dexheimer is from San Diego, CA, and was ordained in 1996 and served Lutheran congregations in Kansas. In New Zealand, she has served as the Vicar/Minister of Bell Block-Lepperton Co-operating Parish, and Assistant Priest of St Mary's Pro-Cathedral in New Plymouth.

JoEllen Duckor is the Mashpia (spiritual director) of Temple Sinai, Wellington's Progressive Jewish Congregation and Community Worker for the Wellington Jewish Care of the Aged. JoEllen is also Spiritual Director at the Dawn Trust, a home for disabled adults.

Andrew Dunn lives and works at Oasis Retreat and Study Centre, Albany

Mark F. Fischer is Professor of Theology at St. John's Seminary in Camarillo, California, the seminary of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles. He serves as the webmaster of the Karl Rahner Society (<http://www.krs.stjohnsem.edu/>) and has written *The Foundations of Karl Rahner*, which will be published in November, 2005 by Crossroad Publishing Company of New York. Mark is married and has three sons.

John Franklin's diverse ministry includes spiritual direction and ministry supervision. He is a teaching assistant in HRD at Massey University, Palmerston North. He also works with preachers and with Koreans learning NZ English.

John Franklin's diverse ministry includes spiritual direction and ministry supervision. He is a teaching assistant in HRD at Massey University, Palmerston North. He also works with preachers and with Koreans learning NZ English.

David Grant is retired at Snells Beach after ministry in New Zealand parishes and the Department of Parish Development and Mission in the Presbyterian Church. His book of prayers for worship is listed in the Books section above. He is married to Alison and they have three children and five grandchildren.

Jenny Harrison is co-Vicar of St Peter's Anglican Parish in Onehunga, Auckland.

Aynsley Mackie is a trained counsellor, a spiritual director and with a group of others assists in leading retreats. She lives in Massey, West Auckland.

John North is a retired Baptist minister, a spiritual director and member of the SGM Workgroup and lives in Manurewa.

Sue Pickering, an Anglican priest, co-ordinates the SGM Spiritual Directors' Formation Programme, and is a spiritual director, retreat facilitator and writer.

Andrew Pritchard lives in the Shalom Christian Community at Paraparaumu and works as a spiritual director and teacher of personal and spiritual formation. Relaxation comes in active forms - woodwork and playing golf and in less active forms - reading, listening to music and watching sport. Andrew is convenor of SGM, is married to Lynn and they have three adult children.

Sheila Pritchard enjoys a self-employed lifestyle offering spiritual direction, supervision and retreats, with seminars and a bit of teaching thrown in. Since moving to the North Shore she enjoys walking the East Coast beaches.

Murray Rae. After teaching theology for six years at King's College, London, Murray has recently returned to Dunedin and the University of Otago where he teaches theology and ethics.

Christine Renner works part time for True Colours, a charitable trust, when she is not meditating, praying, doing housework or playing with grandchildren, and lives in Hamilton.

Douglas Riddle spent many years in India working with the Church of North India and in New Zealand parishes. He now lives in retirement at Narrow Neck, North Shore City.

Adrienne Thompson grew up in India and spent much of her adult life in Bangladesh. She trained as a spiritual director after returning to New Zealand in 1999 and now lives in Wellington.

Alan Upson is a Methodist minister with the New Plymouth and Waitara parishes, in his first year of the Spiritual Director's Formation Programme.

Jo White is training as a spiritual director and lives in Hamilton. Jo enjoys engaging with God through the contemplation of spiritual theology, garden design, conservation, installation art and the Japanese culture.

Jane Wilkinson is a busy mother of three, a nurse and a spiritual director working hard to hold it all together. She lives in Tauranga, and is a member of the SGM Workgroup.

Margaret Woollett is a calligrapher who lives and works in Devonport, North Shore City (see centrespread).

Paul Heppleston has a background in ecology research, music and writing. He's a member of the Iona Community and an organist/church musician involved in contemplative worship and meditation and leading pilgrimage groups. In 2002 he spent 3 months in NZ leading worship and singing workshops and working with the Sisters of Compassion in Wellington.

Ahmed Zaoui, formerly a university lecturer in religious studies and a political leader in his native country Algeria, is currently awaiting for the affirmation of his right to remain in New Zealand as a political refugee. Being an Imam (spiritual leader) and father of four, he has a special interest in the topic of God's grace in Islam. His English translation was assisted by Sallyanne Mason and Eesvan Krishnan.

## FOR REFLECTION

Take a good look, friends,  
at who you were when you got called into this life.

I don't see many of "the brightest and the best" among you,  
not many influential, not many from high-society families.  
Isn't it obvious that God deliberately chose  
men and women that the culture overlooks  
and exploits and abuses,  
chose these "nobodies" to expose  
the hollow pretensions of the "somebodies"?

That makes it clear that none of you can get by  
with blowing your own horn before God.

Everything that we have - right thinking and right living,  
a clean slate and a fresh start - comes from God  
by way of Jesus Christ.

That's why we have the saying,  
"If you're going to blow a horn,  
blow a trumpet for God".

1 Corinthians 1: 26-31.  
*The Message*. NavPress 2002.

Peace is not something you can force on anything or anyone...  
much less upon one's own mind.  
It is like trying to quiet the ocean by pressing upon the waves.  
Sanity lies in somehow opening to the chaos,  
allowing anxiety,

moving deeply into the tumult,  
diving into the waves,  
where underneath,  
within,  
peace simply is.

Gerald May, MD 1940-2005

Jerry May died peacefully on April 8, 2005. May was Shalem's Senior Fellow of Contemplative Psychology and Spirituality and also a founding member of Spiritual Directors International.

SDI mailing 2.5.05

Matthew 11:28 - 30. Come to me and I will give you rest - all of you who work so hard beneath a heavy yoke. Wear my yoke - for it fits perfectly - and let me teach you; for I am gentle and humble, and you shall find rest for your souls; for I give you only light burdens.

What a relief  
to come to you, Lord  
Others slave-master us  
loading more and more  
onto already bowed shoulders  
crushing us with added burdens  
which overpower and overwhelm  
Helpless, many surrender  
without struggle  
guiltily trying to reorganise lives  
to adjust to new demands  
What's the point  
of life without life?  
Why conform  
to the insistent beat  
of more, more, more  
rush, rush, rush  
when you offer a different way?  
Courage us Lord  
to escape  
the tyrannous treadmill  
Show us  
how to take your words seriously  
Help us find the yoke  
which fits us perfectly  
Your yoke of freedom

8 March 02  
© Anna Johnstone

THE SPIRITUAL DIMENSION is your love, your centre, your commitment to your value system. It's a very private area of life and a supremely important one. It draws upon the sources that inspire you and tie you to the timeless truths of all humanity, and people do it very, very differently.

*From Daily Reflections for Highly Effective People*  
by Stephen R Covey.

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The thought of my affliction  
and my homelessness  
is wormwood and gall.  
My soul continually thinks of it  
and is bowed down within me.  
But this I call to mind,  
and therefore I have hope:

The steadfast love of the  
Lord never ceases,  
his mercies never come  
to an end;  
they are new every morning;  
great is your faithfulness.  
"The Lord is my portion,"  
says my soul,  
"therefore I will hope in him."

Lamentations 3:19-24  
NRSV. Thomas Nelson Inc. 1989

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A state of mind  
That sees God in everything  
Is evidence of growth in grace  
And a thankful heart.

Charles G. Finney

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Christian theology doesn't lead us to finding the god within each of us. It leads us to inviting the divine, loving Other to dwell within us so that we have a transcendent reference point for living with our brothers and sisters, the rest of God's children.

Paul Nuechterlein

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The Author of This Poem is a Number  
I do not know  
what will happen after I die.  
I do not want to know.  
But I would like the Potter to make a whistle  
from the clay of my throat.  
May this whistle fall into the hands  
of a cheeky naughty child  
and the child to blow hard on the whistle  
continuously  
with the suppressed and silent air of his lungs  
and disrupt the sleep  
of those who seem dead  
to my cries.

From an unknown prisoner at the  
Baxter detention centre in Australia

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