

Celebration LINK

A letter to our Companions and friends

November 2000

Most of what we read in Christian literature these days has to do with the problems of living the Christian life. Either that, or discussions about issues of current interest to the church. It's not often that we read up about Christian dogma or the fundamental beliefs of the church.

So it was quite refreshing recently to debate the subject of free grace with a couple of our fellow Community members who were visiting us from the USA. The peg was a book* by an Episcopal priest (Robert Capon) which happened to be doing the rounds at the time.

Capon's point is that Jesus' message - the gospel - was a proclamation that all are forgiven, all are accepted in the beloved, without condition. That's the meaning of grace. It's clear in the Gospels that Jesus pronounced forgiveness, not to those who repented, but *before* they repented. The only people who attracted words of condemnation from him were those who, in the name of God, denied that good news and erected barriers between us and him.

This message is so radical that most people, including a large proportion of Christians, simply cannot accept it. Society at large praises or condemns people on the basis of their worthiness. The Church does the same, in a subtle (or sometimes not so subtle) way.

Think of the gospel message as proclaimed by generations of evangelists and preachers. The hellfire and damnation tradition of preaching starts with a picture of God who sees everything and everybody in the world as unholy and sinful, condemned to eternal separation from himself unless they take responsibility and wake up to certain realities. Not all, of course, begin at that place, but the impression of barriers and conditions is nevertheless pervasive.

First, one has to acknowledge one's sinfulness; then one has to repent; then believe certain theological propositions about Jesus and his death on the cross, taking them to heart in a personal way; then, in one form or another (depending on whether one is a Catholic or a Protestant) become part of the church. It is only by going through this process that we can be assured of God's forgiveness and acceptance, and of our place in eternity with him. It follows, in some quarters, that the only people acceptable to God are those in the church.

The message that Jesus brought, however, was not this or anything like it. The form of message outlined above effectively turns faith into a species of work, a transaction that happens between ourselves and God. Yet the witness of the New Testament, that grace is a free gift which cannot be gained by any prior action or decision on our part, gives the lie to this. Jesus too makes it clear (for example, in the parable of the labourers in the vineyard) that the reward has nothing to do with merit. The way we read these passages, however, is often coloured by theological ideas we have absorbed from centuries past about how exactly God manages to achieve salvation.

The 'gospel' outlined above is a sort of tit-for-tat operation which will inevitably exclude anyone who doesn't participate. But if we start from a different premise, that the free gift has already been bestowed, to all without condition, from the foundation of the world, then grace becomes a reconciling gift hidden throughout creation which was manifested finally and fully in Jesus. It is referred to by Paul as a 'mystery', and described in more homely terms by Jesus as the leaven in the dough or the treasure hidden in the field.

The essence of this mystery is that God has accepted us, no matter what kind of people we are. There is no condemnation. Jesus himself said he didn't come to judge. God is not in the business of

assigning guilt, or even in sin prevention. He is in the business of sin forgiving. Instead of telling us to clean up our act, in Jesus he has become part of the mess that we live with, participating with us in the universal fact of failure, suffering and death.

Of course, there are passages and parables where Jesus appears to speak about judgement and condemnation. But the way these are understood depends very much on our starting point. If our theological premise is that God saves by offering something to which we have to respond in turn, then judgement becomes the just reward or punishment for our failure to do so. But if grace is the mystery hidden for ages in creation, the parables of judgement have nothing to do with spiritual book-keeping. The point of them is to say that, despite what it may look like, there is a celebration (a 'wedding banquet') going on; and if we will only trust it we will be OK. If we don't, we'll miss it, and that will be our loss. We should not be distracted by lurid imagery; it was the way they spoke in those days.

All this is but a taster of a much larger discussion, which there is no space to continue here. But why would it be interesting to those of us who have lived many years in community?

Community is not about lifestyle or ideology; at root it is about faith and spiritual life. To have any meaning, faith must have some practical expression, but why should that take the form of community, particularly? As soon as one asks that question, it becomes clear we are thinking about some very fundamental issues indeed.

Once we have been through the process of Christian initiation and have learned the basic tenets of the Christian religion, for some people it is as if that foundation can be taken as read. It does not inspire them to be reminded about it, nor does it necessarily inform their present lives in any really vital way. What is important is living an upright life, helping people, being part of the organisation, conforming to what is expected, perhaps gaining inspiration from ideas and movements current in the church.

For some, the foundation is simply a position to be defended, like people waving a union jack at

a football match. For others (and there are a surprising number of them in the church) it is something that is never talked about, rather like the embarrassing pictures taken of oneself as a child. In neither case does it make much difference to real life. But when we talk about something as radical as *community*, it raises the question of what we believe. Because people really do feel that what we believe should make a difference to life.

We, of course, don't consider that basic Christian belief should automatically lead to community living. But there is *some* connection, and that was what sparked our interest in the discussion about free grace.

There are several problems with the 'transaction' approach to the Christian's relationship with God. First and foremost, it doesn't deal with the problem of guilt, no matter what the formal theology may say. Avoiding sin becomes a preoccupation. God's approval largely depends on our performance. The Christian message becomes condemnatory, deploring everything from loss of Sunday observance to failure to be concerned about the poor, from laxity in morals to the abandonment of religion.

If God's approval depends on our performance, that is not only contrary to the Gospel but is also unsustainable as a motivation for behaviour. It leads either to conformity, which is the antithesis of freedom (though it takes many forms), or to loss of belief in God. Such theology as this, which is not necessarily conscious, also has the effect of neutering Christian dogma, rendering it a set of mental propositions rather than living truth which is part of our daily experience. Why then does it seem so pervasive?

It permeates our thinking for the same reason that the world rejects the message of Jesus: we cannot deal with freedom. We cannot believe that God accepts us just as we are, that he makes no judgement of us, that we are free to behave as we wish. God *will* accept us, we believe, *provided* we change and accept his conditions. Like the world, we believe that without sanction there would be chaos. If the Gospel was really true, people would indulge in sin to their hearts content, 'that grace may abound', as Paul put it.

The idea that God has given up on law as a means of keeping us in line, has decided to give salvation as a free gift to everyone, and, in Jesus, has become one with us in the whole human mess, turns out in practice to be more than most people can take on board. But the fact is that believing the Gospel has exactly the opposite effect to that which we expect. In Jesus life is a party, and the only losers are those who won't join in.

In Jesus, the medium truly is the message. Zacchaeus didn't join the party because he heard a sermon; he responded to the party giver. Likewise, the Christian doctrine of grace never needs to be separated from its incarnate reality. And that is why a discussion of that doctrine was so interesting to us. We find all sorts of ways to speak about community, but we discover its deepest meaning when we trace it back to its fundamental roots in the life and teaching of Jesus.

In community, a party or wedding banquet was always one of the most powerful images

interpreting what we were about. Anyone could join, without going through any religious hoops whatsoever. In a sense community was the death of religion, while at the same time bringing God very near. And like Zacchaeus, a disreputable character could in principle live and enjoy the kingdom of God, while some religious people could hardly stand it.

It is one thing to speak about this, another to have experienced it. Grace – the free gift of God to everyone without distinction – was a living, operative reality, though we very rarely spoke of it in such technical language. We probably broke a lot of the religious conventions, but we felt closer to God than many say they do in church. One of the difficulties was finding a language to talk about it. In a discussion on grace, and the way that doctrine has been distorted, we felt we were being put in touch with our roots.

Phil Bradshaw

**The Mystery of Christ, and why we don't get it (Eerdmans)*

A UK Perspective

At the circulation of our last newsletter, we were within a month of our annual conference at Gilmory Conference Centre, near Pittsburgh.

The centrepiece of that conference was the expanded Rule of the Community, which was distributed to all conferees. This document, running to 24,000 words, fleshed out the somewhat condensed paragraphs of the original – yet even so it was felt to be too condensed! It was an indication to us of how much material there is, stored away in the principles of our life.

Presentation of the expanded Rule was supported by teachings from Phil Bradshaw, Erba Ritter and Bill Farra, as well as by worship and creative activity. Worship in the Gilmory chapel was stunning at times, particularly a Taizé-style service, the sensory effect being enhanced with icons, candles and a brilliant 'patchwork quilt' of coloured designs by conferees. Group discussion and a fun night completed the experience.

The aim of the conference was to begin the process of teaching the core beliefs and principles which have sustained our community life over the years. In early days, we felt a strong commitment to the institutional church – not least because we saw ourselves as part of it. That policy paid dividends in gaining acceptance from church hierarchy and opening doors that might otherwise remain closed. But despite the popularity of Fisherfolk music and its undoubted influence worldwide, it was almost impossible to reproduce as the Community did it because that required certain lifestyle conditions. In the same way, principles such as shared leadership certainly did much to change thinking in many churches. But in some respects all of this was superficial.

What motivated the pioneers of our life was a deep response to God. It was a response that went deeper than ideology and could not be adequately conveyed in terms of techniques, programmes or structures.

It was that response which was the enduring core of our witness. However, over time it did seem that our ministry had shifted from focusing on 'church renewal' to being more of a focus for those who had given their lives to God and were now trying to make sense of their faith in the modern world. We still send teams to churches on request, but the emphasis today is more on networking.

Networking has different requirements than 'church renewal', which often depends on the promotion of a certain idea (usually simplified to make it accessible to everyone). Networking involves dialogue, openness, listening – all features of community life – and can be costly in terms of time and resources. The payoff is long term and not easily predictable, but the 'renewal' that it brings will be as much our own as anyone else's.

All this is the background to our discussions on ministry over the last few months. The shift referred to has been given added impetus by structural changes in the UK and the closure of the Episcopal church in Aliquippa. All Saints has now been taken over by the Church Army who have renamed it 'The Well'. A Church Army officer from a tough area of Sydney, Australia, has decided to bring his family to Aliquippa, and the Community has already been involved in arranging accommodation for the new arrivals.

In October, Bill Farra and May McKeown came to Britain to attend a meeting of CCCT. Together with Phil and Margaret Bradshaw, they visited Roger and Eleanor Orr at their church in Peckham – a very different experience from the typical English suburban church. They also spent some time with Maggie Durran, a former Community member well known for her creative writing, now ordained and working in central London. The purpose of these visits was to renew relationships and to gain a sense, particularly for

Bill and May, of where the church is in the UK today.

The latter, of course, is a question to which there is no simple answer. A meeting with Jerry Lepine, the Southwark Diocesan Adviser on Evangelism, confirmed that there is no 'big idea' dominating church life today, despite the success of certain features like the Alpha course. Our own thoughts about networking and seeking to articulate the meaning of Christian faith in a modern setting reflect the fact that older networks which supported various movements have faded away, and there is a need to establish new ones which are more in tune with today's needs. We discussed several avenues to explore.

Later, Bill, May and Phil travelled to Dorset to meet up with a group of friends from earlier community days, sharing different perspectives and journeys and the need for connections that support us along the way. One striking feature was how little those who had given their lives to God in the past felt supported by the church in their spiritual life today. Others had gone into ordination, in the hope that the official ministerial channels would satisfy a lifelong desire. But the experience was often mixed.

Various other contacts and visits, plus the need to discuss future projects and to set up a computer system capable of dealing with the need for a UK web site, made for a very full trip. There is a lot to digest and work with in the coming months.

At the end of November Susan, Phil and Margaret will be visiting the Community for their autumn retreat. Susan, for health reasons, has now decided to relinquish her post as Secretary to the Trust. We seek your continued prayers for her, and for us all as we explore the way forward together in the next few months.

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