

## **Grace: God's extravagantly generous giving (2 Cor 8:9)**

(A sermon preached in St Andrew's church, St Andrews, 29 June 2003)

2 Cor 8:7-15

In the middle of our second reading this morning is one of the NT's great summaries of the Gospel: 2 Corinthians 8:9. A traditional translation is: 'you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that, though he was rich, for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.' We could put that alongside, for example, the famous summary of the Gospel in John 3:16: 'God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that all who believe in him should not perish but have eternal life.' That says much the same in different words, but we shall focus this morning on the particular way Paul summarizes the Christian message in 2 Cor 8:9.

'You know the **grace** of our Lord Jesus Christ, that, though he was rich, for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.' The first thing to notice is that word 'grace.' That's why I gave you the traditional translation. It's a word we're very familiar with in church, in the Bible, in the liturgy, in prayers. For many of us it sounds very familiar. But the meaning is not at all obvious to modern speakers of English, because the meaning of grace in ordinary English - not a very common word, but insofar as we use it at all, the meaning has really hardly anything to do with the meaning the word grace has in the NT or Christian religious use. On the other hand, it's very difficult to find another English word that will do the job. The Greek word is *charis*, and it's actually one of those Greek words that were rather unremarkable words in their ordinary use, but which early Christians made into ways of saying some very distinctively Christian things. Another word like that is the Greek word *agape*, which is the usual word in the NT for love. In Greek it was a rather colourless, rarely used word - but because Christians wanted to say something new and different about love, they took over this word that didn't already have any very potent meaning and made it into a very potent word by filling it with the meaning of the love they had discovered in Jesus Christ and the Gospel of God's unexpected love for us. *Charis* was a little like that. It becomes a central word for saying what Christians had to say that was new and remarkable. Especially Paul made it a favourite word, hugely evocative of the Gospel message.

*Charis*, grace, means basically 'giving' - not so much 'gift,' in the sense of the thing that is given, more 'giving,' in the sense of the act of giving. Paul uses it to mean God's act of generous self-giving to us that is the story of Jesus. Let me bring in now the other translations of 2 Cor 8:9. The one we heard read (REB) says this: 'You know the generosity of our Lord Jesus Christ: he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor...' That sounds right, doesn't it?: Our Lord impoverished himself, gave away all his wealth to make us rich. That's generosity, isn't it? Yes, but the translation really doesn't quite do, because grace isn't a quality of God, an attitude, a disposition. It's what God does, it's his act of generous giving. So NRSV translates it in this way: 'you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor...' That's better. Grace is that act of giving for others. Grace is not just God's attitude to us, nor is it, as people sometimes tend to think,

some kind of stuff that God doles out to us. Grace is God being unimaginably generous in giving us himself in Jesus Christ - the impoverishment that becoming human has to mean for God, Jesus' life of utter self-giving for others, Jesus' giving up his life so that we may live. Grace is God's love in self-sacrificing action for us.

One way in which it makes an enormous difference to realise that grace is not just an attitude of God or a disposition, but what God actually does, is that therefore God's grace is something effective and powerful and transformative. God did not become human and live and die for us in Jesus just in order to *show* us that he's rather fond of us. He did it to make a difference. In fact, after creation itself, God has never done anything that makes more of a difference to his world than the incarnation and the cross of Jesus. God's grace, his giving of himself, is the greatest power there is to transform human life.

The other thing to notice about this little summary of the Gospel is that Paul here uses a financial, or, if you like, an economic image to picture how it is that God's giving in Christ benefits us: 'you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich.' Jesus did not, literally, give all his money away to make the poor rich. He didn't have much to give. Although the fact that Jesus was literally one of the poor is not irrelevant to what Paul is saying, the main point is metaphorical. The Son of God gave up all the privileges of being God, we might say. Or Jesus expended himself (that's a financial metaphor) - Jesus expended himself entirely for others. Jesus spent (that's also a financial metaphor) - Jesus spent his whole life, gave it away, so that we might enjoy the riches he bought for us with the cost of his whole self.

Why does Paul here formulate the Gospel in economic terms? One important reason is that in the wider context Paul is dealing with very down-to-earth financial matters. He spends two chapters of this letter to the Corinthian church talking about an enterprise that he saw as very central to his apostolic mission: his collection for the Jerusalem church. Paul encouraged all his churches to contribute money to a gift for the relief of the impoverished Christians in Jerusalem. It was a very practical matter - but it was also for Paul a kind of demonstration of what the new Christian faith was all about. It would bring together the Gentile Christians of his churches with the Jewish Christians of Jerusalem, and it would reflect in a very tangible way the generous self-giving of God that the Gospel was all about. So at the heart of what Paul is on about here is the connexion between God's generous giving in Christ and the very practical form of giving for others that Paul is encouraging his readers to undertake.

That's why the way Paul uses the word 'grace' in this passage of 2 Corinthians is remarkable for the fact that, in addition to using it in the way we've been thinking about - of God's giving in Jesus Christ's giving of himself - Paul also uses it of Christians giving away material things, money. He calls his collection 'this grace' - 'this generous undertaking' (NRSV, v 7) - and urges his readers to abound in it or excel in it - in other words to give very generously themselves. We shouldn't imagine that Paul is even here talking about something other than *God's* grace. Grace for Paul is always God's grace. God's grace alone is Paul's whole message. There is nothing else but God's grace, God's giving of himself in Jesus Christ. So Paul's readers' giving

- our giving, our grace - is nothing less than God's grace in Jesus Christ working through us, God's generosity happening through our generosity.

So when Paul reminds us, in this context, of the generosity of Jesus who impoverished himself to make us rich, he is saying something very much more than that Jesus is an example we should follow. He's not just doing what fund-raisers sometimes do when they want to get the rich and famous to contribute to their cause – ‘Look, millionaire So-and-so has been enormously generous, what about you?’ That's just a way of making people feel they ought to give. But when Paul summarizes the Gospel he's summarizing *the Gospel*. Not a new law, not a new set of ought-s we have to try to live up to. Not something to copy, but something that changes us, that transformative power of God's grace that Paul sees, I think, as a kind of overflowing of God's generosity through Jesus into our hearts and our lives so that it pours out of us as naturally as it does from God who is the generous source of all giving. That's the sense in which our giving is *God's* grace, God's grace become ours. God's grace is a kind of giving that turns its recipients into givers.

Of course, this isn't just a matter of giving money and possessions. God's grace changes the whole character of human life. so that the whole of life is experience of God's grace, living, as it were, out of God's generous giving to us, so that at the same time the whole of life is an expression of God's grace, living out that expending of himself for us that Jesus lived. That's Paul's vision of the Christian life transformed by grace. It's just that here he brings it down to where in some sense it is tested - in relation to money. And although Paul is quite explicitly fund-raising, no doubt about it, he will have nothing to do with the realistically pragmatic tactics of the average fundraiser. ‘I don't want your money,’ he says. ‘God doesn't want your money if you are giving it out of any sort of compulsion, with reluctance, only if you are eager to give.’ It's very interesting that another word that runs through this passage of Paul's letter along with the word ‘grace’ is a word we could translate ‘eagerness’ (that's the translation in vv 7, 11, 12 IN NRSV). In other words he wants us to really, really want to give - the way Jesus did. Otherwise it would not be grace - and grace is all Paul's interested in here.

Now just one more word that Paul uses. It's a word Paul is constantly using in connexion with grace. It's a word that means something like ‘abounding’ or ‘excessive’ or ‘overflowing.’ God doesn't just give, he gives abundantly, extravagantly. God doesn't give in a sort of carefully calculated way that is just enough but no more. After all, God gives himself away for us. God gives all he can because it's in God's nature to give to those he loves. This is what comes through again and again in Paul's talk about God's grace. It's what Paul found in Christ at the heart of the Gospel: God's extravagant generosity. Paul is captivated by this extravagant generosity of God. So it's out of the abundance of what God gives us that we can give to others.

This passage is, if you like, the Gospel expressed as God's economics - a very different kind of economics from the way the world worked in Paul's time or works in ours. It's an economics of abundance and extravagant generosity. It's an economic system that has only one resource - God's own generous self-giving - but that is a superabundant resource. The principle is free generosity: all comes freely from God to us, everything God has to give is unstintingly bestowed on us, and is to be as freely

passed on to others. 'Freely you have received, freely give' is the principle of God's economy as Paul puts it somewhere else. God's economy is a process of constant overflowing of blessing, and the thing about it that is really, as it were, out of this world, not the way this world expects things to work, is that the generous giving brings abundance to those who give as well as to those to whom they give. This is not the principle of free-market economics that if we make as much money as we can for ourselves some of it will benefit the poor too. It's not being selfish and very conveniently being able to help others with no cost to oneself. On the contrary, it is costly. This is the economy of the God who impoverished himself so that we, the poor, might become rich. This is costly generosity, not calculating charity. But those who give themselves as Jesus did, unselfishly, unstintingly, with no thought of reward, are those who are in fact rewarded. No people live more fulfilled lives, lives more full of the abundance of God, than the saints who have given all for God and for others. And, as Paul also insists, the overflowing of God's grace even flows back to God himself, in the abundance of thanksgiving to God that comes from the hearts of those who know his grace.

I was going to end there, but looking at 2 Corinthians again, which is full of this language of abundance and excess that Paul is so fond of, I was struck by something I hadn't noticed before: how it impacts what Paul says about the future God has for us beyond death. 'Isn't this life enough?' people sometimes say nowadays. Most people in history haven't said that, but in our affluent society, where most of us live long and in reasonable health and wellbeing, isn't this life enough? Or, if we think less selfishly, isn't a life of serving God and others its own reward? Isn't this life enough? But God's extravagant generosity isn't just about - what might be enough. It would have been good enough for Jairus (in our Gospel reading today) had Jesus only got there in time to restore his daughter to health. He didn't expect resurrection. Even when she died, he wouldn't have asked for that. But Jesus was about bringing home to us the extravagant generosity of God. And Paul in 2 Corinthians talks about our destiny in Christ as 'an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure.' God does nothing by halves, we have no way of counting what the superfluity of God's grace will be for us in all eternity.

”We know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ who, although he was rich, yet for our sakes became poor, so that we, through his poverty, might be rich.”