

Along the track

Grace

Recently I received a gift of \$100,000, completely out of the blue, a generous gift with no strings attached. It wasn't a payment for anything or repayment of a loan. Just a free, undeserved gift. But what to do with it? Put it away for a rainy day? I have five children – divide it up five ways? But does one need more than the others at this stage? What about a new car? A decent overseas trip? Is there a charity that needs a donation, people who desperately need help. The reality is, such a free gift welcome and generous as it is, asks something.

To set your mind at rest, I did not receive such a gift. I was just getting your attention. What response did you have? Do you ever wonder about winning the lottery and what you might do with it? Grace is like the \$100,000, a free, undeserved gift. It doesn't require certain preconditions to be met. We don't earn it. It is not ours by right. It is just God's generous and free gift. But what is it and what should I do with it?

I wonder what the Prodigal Son might have done after his father welcomes him with such joy. Whatever he had done was not an issue, he is home! His father takes him back into his house and prepares a special celebration for him. 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate.

But the other son is very upset. He says to his father, all these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But he too was the recipient of such a free gift, just over a longer time. The father replies, everything I have is yours. You know that, and you have always known that but together we have to celebrate the return of your brother. The other son acted ungraciously (an important word) to both the father and his estranged brother.

Jesus tells us a number of stories like this, reminders that grace is a gift from God, not from us. Do you remember Jesus' story about the labourers in the vineyard? The owner hires labourers in the early morning and agrees to pay them a certain amount, then others come some hours later and are hired then others come later in

the day. At the time to down tools, the owner pays them all the same amount. When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner. 'These who were hired last worked only one hour,' they said, 'and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day.'

"But he answered one of them, 'I am not being unfair to you, friend. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius? Take your pay and go. I want to give the one who was hired last the same as I gave you. Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?'

We do feel for the faithful son and for the labourers in this story and we are meant to. The stories challenge our sense of fairness and justice. Underneath it all, do we feel that a gift needs to be earned, that God's love and mercy needs to be merited?

Are we acting ungraciously too? It is not us to judge who should get God's grace and who should not. For one thing, we never know the full story. Grace is meant to be transformative. It can, if we let it, change our way of thinking – it asks us to be as generous in mind and heart as the giver. As the father of the wayward son says with some sense of amazement – couldn't you see that your brother has returned and so how can we do anything else but welcome him home. That is the message behind Jesus' stories. God's grace is about generosity of mind in how we think of others and generosity of heart in how we deal with them.

In Pope Francis' words: "At times we find it hard to make room for God's unconditional love.... We put so many conditions on mercy that we empty it of its concrete meaning and real significance. That is the worst way of watering down the Gospel." *Amoris Laetitia* #311

Regards
Jim Quillinan

Email: jquillinan@dcsi.net.au