

I speak in the name of God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

One of the many things that I'm getting to like about La Jolla is the La Jolla Light newspaper. I'm sure it's familiar to many of you. It's a very fun, informative little paper although it does give a slightly distorted view of life in La Jolla I feel. I think if you came from out of town you'd get the impression if you read only that paper that every time the sun went down people in La Jolla only ever went out in cocktail wear. If you look at the pictures there's never anybody after dark wearing anything other than a tux or a cocktail dress.

Be that as it may I do like the beginning of section B. There's always a column on the left called 10 questions and they are some local worthy 10 questions with a view to them making themselves known to the community. One of the questions is always this: "If you hosted a dinner party for eight, you could invite eight people living or deceased, who would you invite?"

Joe Dangelo who's answering the question this week in the La Jolla Light says, "Leonardo Da Vinci, Albert Einstein, Charles Darwin, Christopher Columbus, Jonas Salk, Stephen Hawking, Neil Armstrong and Ferdinand Magellan." Not a bad list. Who'd be in your eight? There's quite a guest list at the dinner that's recorded in our gospel reading today from Saint John. That's got quite the line-up. There's Judas, Lazarus, who a few days earlier had been dead, Jesus who features on many people's all time fantasy dinner party list. Imagine the conversation you could have. "Judas, what does it feel like all these centuries later to still have your name used as an insult? Lazarus, share some thoughts about being dead. Jesus tell us something about what it's like being the Son of God." Quite some conversation topics there. That would be a meaty discussion.

Actually the amazing thing is that this dinner party isn't remembered for anything that was said. It's not the conversation that got recorded. We don't know what was said because this dinner party is remembered for the outrageous action of Mary the sister of Lazarus. She takes a jar of expensive perfume which would have cost a year's wages in their time. You do the math and work out what it's worth today.

She takes this perfume and pours it over Jesus' feet. If that wasn't enough she then wipes his feet with her hair.

No wonder the conversation topic was forgotten. That would have brought any dinner party conversation to a stop. Judas expressed the anger and amazement that others might have been feeling. I say, isn't that a trifle wasteful? He said, or that's how he'd have said it if he was English. Jesus was having none of it. "Leave her alone" Jesus says. It says in Matthew and Mark "She's done a beautiful thing for me."

I think this story fits with a theme that runs through all the gospels, the great thing of abundance. For the first Sunday I was here to give you an example of the thing, do you remember the gospel that day? It was Jesus turning water into wine. Jesus went to a wedding, they ran out of wine and he turned enough water into wine, not just to feed everyone at the wedding, but there was a ridiculous abundance of the finest wine that no wedding party could possibly drink.

When Peter said to Jesus, "How many times should I forgive someone who sinned against me? A couple of times, 2, 3?" Jesus says, "No, 70 times 7." A ludicrously big number, a number of infinite. The idea is that you go on forgiving, there's no limit.

When Jesus fed 5,000 people, do you remember that story? A little boy brought him bread and fish and he turned it into a picnic to feed over 5,000 people but there was more. The 5,000 people were fed and we're told there were 7 baskets left over. I could go on but you get the idea. Just one more thing - do you remember the gospel from last week, the parable of the prodigal son? That errant son comes home. He doesn't get what he deserves. The father who he's deceived runs out to meet him and he clothes him, feeds him. He doesn't just welcome him home, [he] puts a ring on his finger and throws a big party.

Abundance. This abundance flows out of the biblical concept of grace. Grace, it's a beautiful name, the name of the child being baptized today. Grace, it's a beautiful concept. I looked it up on Wikipedia and I saw it defined thus, "The free and unmerited favor of

God as manifested in the salvation of sinners and the bestowal of blessings." I reckon that sums it up nicely.

When the New Testament says God meets us in this grace it means he meets us like the father goes out to meet the son in the story we were hearing last week of when that prodigal returned home. Do you remember? The father rushed out, embraced him, threw a party to celebrate. Grace is the opposite of judgement. It's unmerited, it's undeserved, it's not mean, it's not calculating, it's overflowing, it's abundant.

Mary recognized the grace in Jesus. She saw that his love for her and her family had no limits, that Jesus held nothing back. She sensed that he was even preparing to die in order that his mission might be accomplished. Jesus said, "She brought the perfume so that she might keep it for my burial." The readings as we get close to Easter have that shadow of death over the stories. Jesus knew what was coming. Mary picked up on that.

As we contemplate these next couple of weeks the well-known story of Easter, just be mindful that there's a certain recklessness about Jesus' actions. There are several times in the story he could have quietly slipped away. He could have not gone through with what was clearly coming his way, but he didn't. Jesus held nothing back. He gave his all. He poured out his life for us on the cross. That's the Christian message.

Mary had a sense of all this and what was happening. She knew that Jesus was acting out of an overflowing, abundant love and she responded accordingly. We should see her actions as an act of loving extravagance. Mary's deep love and gratitude for Jesus was expressed in a way that wasn't carefully planned. It was spontaneous, over the top, unmeasured. It was given in response to what Jesus had done for her and her family. It was an example of extravagant grace, eliciting an outrageous response. It's a reaction that contrasts sharply with that of Judas.

Judas is one of the characters in the gospel, and there are a few of them, who stand in a tradition of "ungrace", for want of a better word. These are the

people who think we should get what we deserve and get annoyed with Jesus because he preached a different message of grace. There was another one in the story last week. The older brother, remember him saying to his father, "Hang on. It isn't fair that the naughty one comes back and you shower him with gifts. It's not right. I've been here all this time, you've never thrown me a party." Every time I sit down with a group of people that look at that story there's always a lot of sympathy for the older brother because part of us feel like he did. This message of grace goes against the grain. There's a logic to what the older brother felt and it's the logic of "ungrace". It's the common sense calculating you, but it's not the way of grace.

It's the Pharisees who are cast as the opponents of Jesus throughout the gospels who best capture this approach of "ungrace". They're very religious. They work at the minimum they have to do to fulfill all the religious requirements of the Old Testament law. They have rules for everything and nothing gives them more joy than keeping to the rules. They're trying to manage their relationship with God. They're saying, "Look if we do all these religious things and we do them properly then we'll be all right with God. He can't possibly be annoyed with this because we'll have made sure we'd done the right thing." That is not grace. That's why they were always in conflict with Jesus, who wasn't interested in minimums, much more interested in maximums.

Einstein had a sign in his office that read, "Not everything that counts can be counted and not everything that can be counted counts." That's what Saint Paul is saying in this Epistle that we heard from the book of Philippians, which like last week, he's giving the theology. The gospel story is acting out that theology. They're saying the same thing. Paul's saying in that passage from Philippians, "If you're counting religiosity then I'm top of the class. I was circumcised on the 8th day, a member of the people of Israel, the most prestigious clan. As for the keeping of the law I was a Pharisee. I was a religious leader. I had it all. No one had more zeal than me, no one worked harder to ensure that I did all the right religious things." "Now" he says, "having encountered Christ Jesus, those things don't count

for anything. I regard all these things as rubbish," it said in our reading.

The original Greek is a much more colloquial word which our translators have spared our blushes with. Paul dismissed all that he'd done before, all his good deeds because he discovered the concept of God's abundant grace. His life was turned around. He found a new and a better way.

I've heard grace described with the following acronym. GRACE, God's riches at Christ's expense. That was the message that grips at Paul. He realized that God loved him not because of his good deeds, his religiosity, his earnestness at following the law, but because of the great love that was expressed in the death and the resurrection of Christ Jesus and because of what Jesus had done for him. God looked kindly on him and met him in grace. He realized his own zeal, his worthy endeavors counted for nothing. All that counted was what Christ had done for him on his behalf.

The baptism we're about to witness is a great example of grace. Baby Grace is the world's newest recipient of God's grace. She's a charming child, we all agree, but she's done nothing as yet to earn God's favor. She's not attended any classes. She's not expressed any particular sound doctrinal view, she's not belonged to any particular tradition, she's done no good and worthy deeds, yet today ... I don't want to prejudge that but as far as I know. Yet today, Grace is received into God's family. She's marked with the sign of the cross to show that she too is a beneficiary of what God has done for us in Christ Jesus.

We're praying that she will continue to walk God's ways as she grows older. That will always be in response to what God has done for her in Christ. She's already marked with a cross. God got there first. She doesn't have to earn God's favor. Baptism is a sign that she's already received it. When we recognize that wonderful truth we can live out of abundance responding to God's overwhelming love, mercy and grace. We can treat life as a gift. We can treat others in a different way, with grace, not as they deserve.

There's a true story of a young boy that lived in a very rural poor town in Tennessee. A local church had a bus ministry, they went around delivering food parcels. Once Saturday the bus driver knocked on a door, a young boy answered. The man said, "Are your parents in?" He said, "No they're not here. They're never here at weekends." He said, "Well who takes you to church?" He said, "I've never been to church." The bus driver said, "More importantly than going to church have you ever heard the greatest love story ever told?" The boy said, "No." They both sat down and the bus driver told him about what God had done in Christ Jesus and about his love expressed in his death on the cross and how God offers in Jesus the free gift of salvation.

The boy was intrigued. He said, "Well I want to come to church tomorrow with you." He picked him up the next day and they went to the service and the boy was really enjoying it. He was enjoying it until the offertory. All these men in suits came around with plates, he didn't know what was going on, he'd never been to church before. Then he realized that the people were putting money in the plates which caused him to panic because he didn't have any money. With great embarrassment he passed the plates around and he felt very bad about it.

Then in a moment he thought, "Oh I know what I can do." He ran up to an usher, tugged at his jacket because ushers always wear jackets. It seems to be part of the uniform. He tugged on the usher's jacket and he said, "Could I have the plate again?" The usher said, "Sure." He said, "No lower." So the usher put the plate lower. He said, "No lower." He put it as low as he could and it still wasn't low enough so he put the plate on the floor. The young boy stepped on the plate and he announced to the whole church, "Jesus, I don't have anything to give you today but just me. I give you me."

He was responding to God's grace just as Saint Paul did, just as Mary did, in a way that Isaac Watts wrote so beautifully in the anthem that we've just heard. "With the whole realm of nature mine, that were an offering far too small. Love so amazing, so divine, demands my life, my soul, my all." Amen.