

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

If you were here last week, count yourself lucky because you heard a magnificent sermon from my colleague, Rebecca. I was fortunate enough to hear it twice, 7:30 and 10:00. And if you missed it, due to the wonders of modern technology, you can hear it for yourself on the website. You can always read it there as well.

It was a great sermon, but she did have a great text to speak on. She was talking about the parable of the Prodigal Son, that well-known story in Luke. And Rebecca brought out the theme of God's abundant, extravagant grace.

And on my way home, I thought to myself, you know, that was a message that I would like to have preached every week in church: The message of God's love, his open invitation to all, his grace, and his abundance. We need constantly to be hearing that wonderful message.

Rebecca talked about how the father in the story ran out to meet his wayward son, the son himself knowing that he deserved nothing. And the father lavished gifts upon him, killed the fatted calf and threw a big party. Everyone was happy, well, except for the sullen older brother and the fatted calf.

And I was very pleased to see that these twin themes of grace and extravagance are repeated again in today's readings. Most clearly in that Gospel reading from Saint John. I looked up the meaning of grace on Wikipedia and saw it defined thus: the free and unmerited favor of God as manifested in the salvation of sinners and the bestowal of blessings. The grace which we read about in the Gospels is the opposite of judgment. It's unmerited, it's undeserved, it's not mean or calculating. It's overflowing and abundant.

Mary, the sister of Lazarus, who we read about in the Gospel, recognized this grace. She saw that Jesus loved her and all people, and in his abundant ministry held nothing back. I'm English, as you know, and I'm not particularly comfortable like my fellow country people with over exuberant forms of greeting. A handshake I think is perfectly fine, hugs are largely unwelcome. I don't know how I would have coped with a greeting like the one that Mary gave Jesus. But I get why she did it.

She poured perfume on his feet and wiped his feet with her hair, as just as an extravagant, abundant greeting.

She sensed that Jesus was preparing himself to die so that his mission might be accomplished. Jesus said, "She bought the perfume so that she might keep it for my burial." And our readings this week are pointing us to the climactic events of Easter. We contemplate again the well-known story of Jesus' last few days. And we can perceive, as we walk with him, a certain recklessness about his actions.

There are several points in the story where he could have avoided what was coming his way. But he didn't. Jesus held nothing back. He gave his all. He poured out himself for us on the cross. Mary sensed this. She knew that Jesus was acting out of an abundance, overflowing, endless love. And she responded accordingly. We can see in her actions an act of loving extravagance.

Mary's deep love and gratitude for Jesus was expressed in a way that I doubt was planned. It was spontaneous, over the top, unmeasured, 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 was a reaction that contrasted sharply with the disciple, Judas, who's also mentioned in our Gospel reading. He was one of the characters in the Gospel who stands in the tradition of un-grace. These are the people who think we all should get what we deserve. There was another one in the story last week, the sullen older brother. Remember him saying to his father, "Hang on, this isn't fair. I've been here all the time slaving away and I didn't get a party."

And there's a logic to what the brother and others are saying. It's the logic of un-grace. It's common sense, it's calculated, it's the way of the world. But it's not grace. It's the Pharisees who are cast in the Gospels as having, as we've just been hearing in our forum, lots in common with Jesus, but also a distinction and in ways puts them in opposition as the opposite of Jesus. They practiced the way of un-grace. They were religious. They worked out the minimum they would have to do to fulfill the requirements of the Old Testament law. They have rules for everything.

And for the Pharisees, nothing gave them more joy than keeping the rules. They're trying to manage their

relationship with God. "If we do this," the Pharisees thought, "then we'll be okay. God will have to reward us for our efforts and look kindly on us." But that's not grace. Grace isn't about minimalism, how little you can get away with. It's about maximums.

Einstein had a sign in his office which read, "Not everything that counts can be counted and not everything that can be counted counts." That's what Saint Paul is saying in that Epistle that we heard from the book of Philippians. He's saying, "If you're counting religiosity, then I score ten out of ten. You couldn't score more highly than me." Paul says, "I was circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, the most prestigious clan. And as to the keeping of the law, I was a Pharisee, a religious leader. I had it all. No one had more zeal than me," Paul says.

"No one worked harder to ensure that I did all the right religious things. But now," Saint Paul says, "I see these things don't count for anything. I regard all these things as rubbish." In fact, he used a much stronger word than that in the original, but thankfully the translators spare our blushes. Saint Paul discovered grace and his life was turned around. He found a new, better, more abundant way to live.

I've heard grace described in terms of an acronym: God's Riches At Christ's Expense. That was the message that gripped Saint Paul. He realized that God loved him and accepted him, not because of his zeal or his own worthy endeavors, but because of what God in Christ had done for him on the cross.

And as we prepare for the end of Lent and on this Passion Sunday when we think about the cross of Jesus Christ, as our Easter celebrations begin, let's be thinking about grace. Jesus is walking the way of the cross on our behalf. God in Christ holds nothing back in showing his love for his people. Let's see the cross in that context.

And how are we going to respond this Easter season? Can we follow Mary's lead by responding in kind? Lavishly? Abundantly? Richly? What would our lives look like if we did? What would be the effect on how we use our time? Spend our money? Expend our energy? Would we regret it? I doubt it. The kind of response that Mary practiced seemed to bring her much more joy than the way of Judas, whose story ends in very sad fashion.

The hymn writer, Isaac Watts, as we've been singing, wrote poetically about his response to the cross of Jesus Christ. He wrote it in his hymn which we just sung, When I Survey the Wondrous Cross, that magnificent last verse with a whole realm of nature mind, "That were an offering far too small, love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all."

And before I close, I want to pick up much more briefly, there's another theme that runs through these passages. In some way, all the readings we've heard look forward, have a future dimension. Isaiah says, "Do not remember the former things or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing." The Psalmist says, "Those who sowed with tears will reap with songs of joy." Saint Paul writes, "Forget what lies behind and he strained forward to what lies ahead." He writes, "I press on towards the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus."

Paul was so gripped by the prospect of what is to come that he said, "For me to live is Christ, to die is gain." That's a very counter cultural thing to say. In our affluent age, who needs heaven? We believe in the eternal presence. We want to make our comfortable now last forever. Part of being human is that by nature we're orientated towards the future. But in our present age, many people sadly have no genuine hope. The tragedy that attends the loss of hope is the vain attempt to make the present eternal. We live in a death denying age. How different to Saint Paul, "To live is Christ, to die is gain."

Of course, Easter is the great celebration of this hope. Saint Paul writes, "I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection." And I think this talk of God's power brings us back to where we started, power too speaks of something like grace, abundant, powerful, out of control.

And there's a challenge in all of this for us. Do we seek to live our lives under the illusion that we're in control? Or do we want to abandon ourselves to the grace and power of God which can transform our lives and give hope both for the now and for the now which is yet to come?

Amen.