
MAKE GRACE YOUR PRIORITY

Fifth Sunday of Lent
18th March 2018

Matthew 20:1-16

Rev John Barr



Last week the world received news of the death of perhaps, the greatest theoretical scientist since Einstein. Professor Stephen Hawking died in his home in Cambridge on Wednesday at the age of 76.

After being diagnosed with an incurable neuro-degenerative condition at the age of 21, Hawking was given just two years to live. But he defied such a prediction and lived for another 55 years. Almost totally paralysed, Professor Hawking is, perhaps, most well-known for his curious and most amazing voice synthesizer. This was controlled by the use of his cheek muscles.

Some saw Professor Hawking's survival along with his incredibly productive life as a miracle. But Hawking did not ascent to this. Rather, he claimed "*religion believes in miracles, but they are not compatible with science.*" Having said this, Hawking attributed his longevity to a fierce will to live and to a stubborn desire not let his illness keep him from having a full life.

Professor Hawking identified himself as an atheist. Stating that the laws of physics can explain the creation of the universe, Hawking says there is no need for a Supreme Being. There may have been a case for God in times past but Hawking was adamant, science today offers a more convincing explanation. Hawking's position is grounded on the assertion that science is based on observation and reason – and this means "*science wins because it works*".

Moreover, Professor Hawking understood the human mind as having an enormous capacity, a capacity that could eventually grasp all the so-God questions with a "theory of everything". Here, Hawking claimed "*there is no aspect of reality beyond the reach of the human mind.*"

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Professor Stephen Hawking has made an incredible contribution to the field of physics and cosmology. The impact of his work will continue to resonate across the world for generations to come. But has he really “nailed” it?

I raise this question because, as a Minister of the Gospel, I engage with such things as justice, mercy and compassion. I encounter such things as grief, fear and anxiety. I touch base with the joys of life and I am drawn into life’s often constant sadness.

I wrestle with issues of conflict, discord and division. I am deeply aware of the hurts people experience and I am privileged to share in the poignant, happy times as major life-events are celebrated.

Where do these things fit into Professor Hawking’s scheme of things?

And what about love? How do we explain “eros”, that kind of love which involves intimacy and an appreciation and enjoyment of beauty?

How do we explain “philia”, that kind of love which involves loyalty, virtue, equality and all the things that characterize relationships between close friends or siblings?

How do we explain “storge”, that kind of love which involves the empathy, warmth and affection felt between parents and their offspring?

And how do we explain “agape”, that kind of love which involves an unconditional, most generous love, where one will give even their very life for the sake and the wellbeing of others?

It seems to me that, often, these realities are far beyond the reach of the human mind. They are way beyond our comprehension and, indeed, our ability to observe and to reason. For these things are graciously gifted to us by the Creator we call God. They can’t be measured, they can’t be rationalized, indeed, they can’t be fully explained.

Today’s reading from Matthew’s Gospel is no exception. Jesus tells the story of a number of labourers who go to work in a vineyard. Some start early and toil all day. Others start later in the morning, others start at noon while others start much later in the day. At the end of the day these labourers receive their pay and an outcry is created as they all, those who worked all day and those who worked for just a short time, receive the same wage.

Now, this is a scandal. Matthew’s Gospel tells us those who worked all day “grumbled” as they complained to the landowner over the injustice of all this. Why should those who worked only a few hours receive the same wage as those who toiled all day in the hot sun?

And Jesus turns the whole scenario on its head as the landowner replies: *“Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage. Take what belongs to you and go.....am I not allowed to do what I choose.....or are you envious because I am generous?”*

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“Are you envious because I am generous?”

Friends, the focus of this troublesome parable concerns the incredible generosity that is God’s grace. The issue at hand here is the absolute abundance and the incredible plentitude of God, especially towards those workers who started late in the day. For this parable defies human understanding. This parable turns what is considered to be rational and common sense on its head!



Here, I can’t help but sympathize with those labourers who toiled all day. For, God’s grace is totally unpredictable. God’s grace is unconventional and weird. God’s grace beggars belief because this grace simply does not match-up or conform to human expectations.

And because of this, the labourers who worked the vineyard all day are hopping mad, they are enraged!

This parable no doubt upsets and confounds many who look for consistency and coherence in the world. This parable no doubt disturbs those who yearn for observable facts and clear cut explanations. Here, Jesus presents a very different view of life. He, to use a colloquialism, throws a spanner in the works!

But the question surely remains. Those “grumbling” labourers who worked all day.....surely they have a case? Why should those who stood idle in the market place for most of the day receive the same wages?

And what’s this business about the last being first and the first being last? Why shouldn’t those who worked hardest be first in line? Surely Jesus defies fundamental logic. Without doubt this story denies the reality of life as we know it!

But, you see, God’s agenda is not our agenda. God’s way is not our way.

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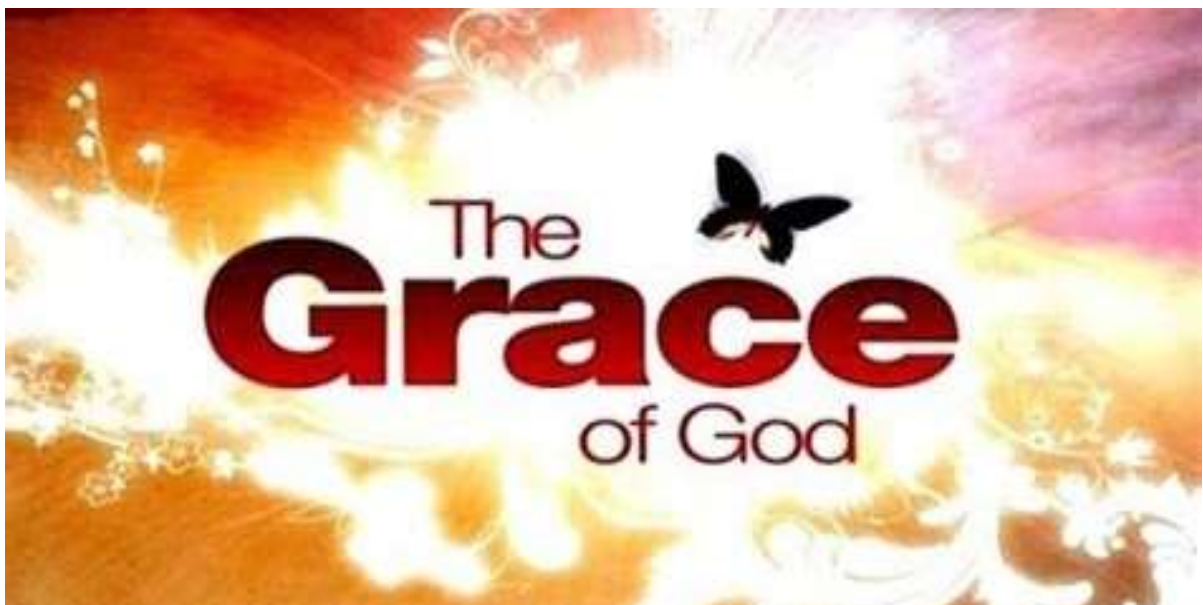
Those labourers who worked all day may well have a case according to notions of what's fair and just. But Jesus throws a different light on the situation as the parable asks the question, do those who work tirelessly for the kingdom receive any specific privileges or entitlements?

Do those who serve the church faithfully over many years by holding office, leading worship, serving on committees or turning up at working bees receive any specific benefits?

And the answer is no! God's abundant, generous grace is unconditionally offered to all. God's incredible, life-giving love is poured out on every person no matter if they have served the church for 50 years or if they walked through the door just today!

In the absolute defiance of human logic and in the outright non-compliance with human expectations - God does God's thing. For, no one earns God's love. No one deserves God's love. No one is entitled to the grace of God. It is a free gift offered to all!

And friends, the challenge for us today is to take hold of this controversial, countercultural, subversive, rather weird love and live it out in this community now.



What might this look like?

I believe it would mean West Epping Uniting Church has a huge, wide, open front door. Here, everyone is welcome, everyone has a place. Race, culture, language ability, theological sophistication, physical ability, mental capacity, socio-economic class, citizenship or residential status must never separate or divide us. The church exists for others. We are not a social club or a group of like-minded people. We are not a community who exists simply for ourselves.

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I believe it would mean that, while we are all accepted and have a place, no one is indispensable. We all have a role to play. And here no one is more deserving, more important or more needed than the other. Every voice should be heard. The ideas, the experiences and the passions of some should never be dismissive of, or a block to, others. Everyone has a vital part to play.

I believe it would mean we are to be a transparent, open, loving, generous community. Here personal grudges have no place. Talk that amounts to gossip behind one's back is inconsistent with the kind of community God calls us to be. Stereotyping of others is wrong. Comments that refer disingenuously, indeed, duplicitly or underhandedly to one's racial characteristics, to one's age or to one's ability are never appropriate. Noisy children are to be accepted while those who are aged or are differently abled are to be valued and respected.

And I believe it would mean we are to be a community who, while reaching out to the wider neighbourhood and the world, holds to a counter-cultural approach to life. Here our vision about who we are and what we do should never be shaped or defined by the busyness of this world together with its yearnings for status, prosperity, comfort, exclusion and security.

Friends, the scandalous, subversive, outrageous, grace of God is to be the fulcrum around which everything happens. This grace is to be the foundation of who we are and of what we do.

We have now come to the end of our series on God's grace. The study booklet, Agents of Grace, was adopted for use in this congregation during the period of Lent. I trust this study, that has guided the sermons on each Sunday over the past five weeks, has been helpful.

If someone were to ask me what's really unique about Christianity, what's distinctive about following Jesus Christ and what does it all mean for me, I would answer with just one word – grace.

Grace, that ubiquitous, pervasive gift from God that startles even the brightest of minds and confounds even the most intelligent of humans is what it's really all about.

Do allow grace to stand at centre of your life. Moreover, allow grace to permeate, form and shape this church community. And remember the universe, in all its complexity, in all its magnificence and splendour, indeed, the human mind with all its astonishment, its intricacy and incredible potential, is always inadequate, is always incomplete and is always less than it could be - without God's grace.

Friends, this sermon started with a reference to the great Professor Stephen Hawking and his incredible contribution to science. I conclude now with a reference to another giant of our times, the Irish singer, song writer and musician, Bono.

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This “Time person of the year” and Noble Peace Prize nominee, is said to hover on the fringe of Christianity. Yet Bono is very much committed to the teachings of Jesus. He says, and I conclude our series on grace with these words, *“The most powerful idea that's entered the world in the last few thousand years - the idea of grace - is the reason I would like to be a Christian.”*

“The most powerful idea that's entered the world in last few thousand years.....”

Friends, as Christians and as a Christian community, make grace your priority. Make grace your absolute priority in everything you are and do!

Amen.

