

REFLECTION 10TH MARCH 2024

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“The Gift of Grace”

In 1994 the Council for World Mission formerly the London Missionary Society sold the Nethersole Hospital in Hong Kong before Hong Kong was returned to Chinese rule. It had been established for over 100 years. I don't know exactly how much the Council for World Mission received from the sale so I googled it and a question came up. What does a religious group do with \$1.6 billion, give or take a few hundred million? This sale was called “The gift of Grace”.

CWM at the time consisted of 31 member churches worldwide and in recognition of this gift of grace decided to gift each member church a portion of this money for the work of God's mission in each local context. It was distributed equally to all 31 churches at the time. This is the bit that breaks my heart. Bangladesh is one of the poorest countries in the world. The majority of the population is Muslim however the Church of Bangladesh also has a significant population. Here in New Zealand the Congregation Union of New Zealand is also a member of CWM along with the PCANZ. In 1994 there were only 7 congregational churches nationally after these 7 churches did not merge with the rest when CUNZ joined the PCANZ in 1967. It once was a thriving church prior to the merger. In my time as Pacific Regional Secretary for CWM I looked after the 10 member churches of the Pacific region. CUNZ was the smallest member church of CWM during my tenure each parish could barely get 20-40 people on a Sunday morning to their worship services, times that by 7 parishes and the total population of the national church totalled approximately 280 people. My experience of this church was one of dysfunction. CWM in their wisdom gifted CUNZ the same amount of money in the gift of Grace to the church of Bangladesh. I don't know exactly how much it was at the time but

let's say hypothetically it was \$2million dollars. All of a sudden 280 people had \$2million dollars to spend as opposed to 1 million people have \$2million dollars to spend. For me there is absolutely no wisdom in that supposed equitable distribution of money. It should have been done proportionately according to the size of each church's population. CUNZ constantly talked about ending their relationship in recent years with CWM because being an Evangelical church did not support CWM's growing liberal theological position and social justice action and direction. I attended some of their General Assemblies where this was debated, they are still members today not because they support CWM's mission but because they know it is a cash cow, they get money annually from CWM which is just accumulating in their lawyer's private bank account and growing interest annually. When a young Cook Island woman applied to train for ministry within the CUNZ using funds that had been earmarked for Ministry training, she was refused time and time again. They did not live justly and in humility and did not represent the values of CWM in the everyday life of their church. I will probably get shot down if any of them were to read this reflection online. This gift of Grace I believe did not live up to its original purpose in many of the churches which did not fulfil CWM's obligation to Gender Justice and equality in their churches. The gift of Grace was not reciprocated at the end of the bottleneck for what it was purposed for. This was literally a free gift and did not need to be earned.

“For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast”. Grace is often associated with salvation.

“Salvation” is not a term heard very much in sermons these days (unless you’re Samoan). It may conjure up many recollections of old-time revivals, when people got ‘saved’, if only for a short spell. But salvation is a prominent biblical term, at the heart of the Christian gospel, and it surfaces in each of the readings for this Sunday in Lent.

According to Rev Dr Jeffrey Frantz who is a retired minister of the United Church of Christ minister in the United States says that “While salvation is alluded to in the gospel stories, it was never a major emphasis for Jesus or for the gospel writers. Rather than talk about salvation, Christianity should stress the importance of living lives of greater wholeness and ongoing personal transformation. That is what Jesus calls us to; and it is what the resurrection unveils for us. The resurrection is about the birth of a new awareness and a new consciousness that lead to lives of personal transformation. This transformation includes our passion and commitment to social and economic justice.”

Australian Biblical scholar and theologian Bill Loader (actually he’s a New Zealander really) says, “One common way has been to see salvation as the ultimate luxury (manufactured by God) and to cultivate those qualities deemed to deserve it and hold proudly to them. We are then 'God's special people' - the worthy, who can then strut our stuff and tell the rest of the world that they should be like us. Even when the persistence of the tradition succeeds in convincing people that it is not something we deserve, but is God's gift, theological accountancy reduces the transaction to the level of the markets again by imagining that God needed to be paid off to be free to love (on the

assumption: who'd want to love, if they weren't paid for it!). Then we are told that God instigated a self-payment by engineering the punishment of his son. Accountancy wins. The ledger was squared. Despite God's daring and generosity our values are then upheld, because we have found a way of reducing the whole thing to being just like the transactions which are fundamental to our economic system, now globalised.”

We here at SAOTT and those who are visiting us, I'm sure we all have experienced a myriad of life-changing situations. Many of us have experienced the death of a loved one; we have been through the pain and struggle of grief and sorrow. Some of us have had major health problems, strokes, heart attacks, and serious operations. Some of us have faced redundancy, depression, loss of self-esteem, loss of hope. But we are here, and I'd like to say, we have survived thus far by the grace of God. We live our lives looking towards the future and when we plan the next project or phase of our life I always add “God willing” or in Samoan “pe a pule alofa le Atua”. Grace is the magnet that keeps us alive and that keeps us going even when we feel there is nothing left or no hope. God's gift of grace is not something that we have to ask for or earn; it is there in the midst of all our turmoil and agony.

When something goes wrong, or when bad things happen to us even though we have been upright citizens we cannot help but question God or the universe and ask, “Why is this happening to me?” It is at these very times that we might lose sight of the fact that this wholly other whom we call God does not will tragedy or misfortune on any of us; it is humanity and its own mortality that puts us in these situations. God exists in order that we may find a way through our pain and out the other end, not a journey around the periphery

but through the heart of the struggle.

Our Ephesians readings say it is not by works that we are saved, but by grace. Some think Ephesians belongs to the second generation of faith, written after Paul, by his friends and supporters speaking in his name and, they assumed, with his blessing.

The question is, is grace a free gift of God or does it also include a reward or recognition for doing the traditional, customary, expected or required religious thing? Is it dependent upon our doing something – some sort of supplementary action – or does it come by our simply and solely but truly trusting and depending upon God and God alone?

The notion of free grace is hard for “good people” to accept, as they think they are not in need of grace. They are wrong – all need God’s grace. Faith is not belief in doctrine. Nor is faith limited to the religious realm – we live by faith in every facet of our lives.

I’m sure many of you are familiar with the Polynesian word “Mana”. I would describe it as “reverence, respect, power and authority” all rolled up together to produce this one word “Mana”. It is used to describe Grace, charisma, power, authority. One can attribute it to God and others can also attribute it to great people. The interesting thing, however, is that as soon as someone tries to possess it for themselves, they no longer have it. One cannot possess something that is a gift. One cannot even say or admit being a person with “mana” because by admission alone they portray arrogance and ignorance thereby contradicting the meaning of mana.

I am sure many of us can site personal examples of God's grace in our lives and times and places where we have seen with our eyes grace in action in our family situations and those close to us. So, if grace is a gift what are we required to do with it? Gifts are to be shared, passed on and kept alive. We hope that people see through our lives God's grace abounding in us, that is our opportunity to share it with them.

I wonder how many other churches within CWM's now 32 member churches are honouring the gift of grace for what it was meant for? The Congregational Church of American Samoa eventually gave in to the pressure to the ordination of women during my time as Regional Secretary because they knew that they would not be able to access money unless they aligned with the values of Gender equality. They have yet to call a woman to a parish except unless she is married to a minister. The other Samoa still retains its pride in being exclusive and not recognising the ordination of women at all. Where is the church's accountability towards justice in all its forms across all forms of discrimination, in terms of ethnicity, culture, sexuality, economically, gender, disability and so forth. How do we fare as a church?

Even though Grace is a gift given freely and we don't have to earn it, there remains the deed of sharing the gift of God's grace in our lives with others. As for me I will continue to say that I have survived thus far by the grace of God. Amen.