

'I have found what I lost': Costly Grace

24 March 2019

The third in a series of six Lent Addresses on Discipleship given by the Dean of Melbourne, the Very Revd Dr Andreas Loewe, during Lent 2019:

Prior Reading: Luke 15:1-7



The German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer at a Confessing Church underground seminary 1937

In last week's Lent Address we reflected on some of the practical implications of following Jesus. We looked at the story of the Good Samaritan in Luke's gospel and the calling of a rich young man. Both are stories about people who found it hard to let go of fundamental dispositions in their lives in order to follow Jesus. The rich young man was told by Jesus that, in order to follow him, he not only needed to obey God's commandments, but more importantly needed to let go of his possessions. That in order to follow Jesus, he needed to love Jesus more than wealth. Jesus, seeing the man, loved him. And the man wept as he walked away from Jesus' invitation.

The lawyer, in response to whose question, Jesus tells the story of the Good Samaritan had asked Jesus what was needed to inherit life eternal. Jesus also reminded him that, in order to live forever with him, which is what eternal life is, he needed to do more than simply follow God's commandments. In his case, the lawyer was told to let go of self-righteousness: the trait of self-justification of why the invitation to follow Jesus may be too complex, too ambiguous, too hard. In wishing to justify himself, he told Jesus, 'I love God and neighbour as myself, but don't know who my neighbour is'. Jesus tells him unambiguously that our neighbours are not restricted to one group of people, but that our neighbours may well be so radically different from us that (as in the case of the Samaritan) they hold different beliefs, may even believe in God differently, or not at all. And this time Jesus walked away from the self-justifying questioner.

How do we show forth the kind of love that God has for us in our lives, I asked you to reflect through the course of last week? What practical things might you do to show that love, first

to yourselves, and then to others? Equally importantly, what are the things that need shifting in your lives that hold you back from showing forth that love to others? What are the areas in your life, where you find it difficult to hear God's invitation to discipleship? What are the things that you first need to do, the things you still lack, before you can take up Jesus' invitation: "You still lack one thing", Jesus told the rich young man: 'Sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.'" What is it that Jesus is telling you that you 'still lack'? Last week's Scripture readings were about letting go, and following without regret or self-justification; were about doing the will of God, establishing a practise and discipline of actions that show forth God's love in our world.

Today we will be taking a further step, and think about the cost of that love. The abundant, extravagant love of God comes at a price. And so we should expect that our own loving, our own following too, will have a cost, a price. Christians call the life-giving love of God grace. A love that overflows so that all may share in love. A love that is made visible in the life of Jesus Christ, who freely shared it with the self-righteous and the rich as much as with beggars and sinners. A love that was raised up on the cross, when Jesus gave his life freely, so that all may share in grace, may experience God's love. A love that is given for all, a love that is available through all ages and there for you and me today. That love comes at a price, the Scriptures tell us, and is radically different from human love.

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At the heart of theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer's writings on Christian discipleship, composed for the students of the underground seminary of the German Confessing Church, stands a reflection on the cost of grace. What cost does grace have, Bonhoeffer asks. And conversely, what does it mean to cheapen grace? There is a clear line in Bonhoeffer's thinking between extending Christ's invitation to come and follow him to all people, and telling all people that they are all right in what they believe. The two, for Bonhoeffer, are utterly incompatible: we pour away Christ's love when we confirm others in their unbelief. Because belief is costly, following Christ comes with a price. In his lectures Bonhoeffer asked: 'Is the price we are paying today with collapse of the organised churches anything else but an inevitable consequence of grace acquired too cheaply? We gave away sacraments cheaply, performed baptisms and confirmations; we absolved an entire people, unquestioned and unconditionally; out of human love we handed over what was holy to the scornful and unbelievers'.

The reason why the church is in decline, Bonhoeffer argued 80 years ago, is because 'we poured out rivers of grace without end, but the call to follow Christ rigorously was seldom heard'. There is, then, a difference between a positive inclination towards faith in general and the specific call to follow Christ. The former, Bonhoeffer argues, would still suit the rich young man and the lawyer of last week's Bible stories: neither of them were opposed to faith as a principle, indeed, both of them professed that they lived by the precepts of faith. But neither of them were able to let go of the one more thing that was needed – the things that preoccupied them even more than living by the precepts of faith, like wealth or the need to be right and righteous – in order truly to follow Jesus. The way of the lawyer and

the rich young man, who seek to follow without giving up what holds them tied to the ways of the world, Bonhoeffer would argue, is the way of cheap grace.

'Cheap grace means justification of the sin and not the sinner', Bonhoeffer explains. 'Because grace alone does everything, everything stays in its old ways. "Our action is in vain", the world remains the world, and we remain sinners, "even in the best of lives".' If there is no need for change, there will be no change. 'Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without the living, incarnate Jesus Christ', Bonhoeffer concludes. Cheap grace allows the lawyer and the rich young man to live their established lives, and turn their back on the one who calls them to come and follow him. Cheap grace forgives and forgets the impediments to discipleship: offers self righteousness rather than divine righteousness, offers temporal living rather than eternal life. The young man retains his riches, wipes away his tears of frustration of not being able to follow and nevertheless carries on living. He has received his reward. The lawyer remains self justified and has received his reward. Neither of them change, and therefore are incapable of sharing the life-transforming call to eternal living with Jesus.

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What then is the cost of grace? What is grace worth? Today's gospel reading offers us two stories that shed light on the extravagant cost of God's love. God gives all, leaves behind all, in order to seek out those who are lost, who are not yet part of the community of followers of Jesus, our gospel reading reinforces. And offers us an invitation to do the same in the very way in which it introduces the two stories of loss and finding, of giving time and care, diligence and risk taking, of leaving behind all in order to become a disciple. In our gospel reading, Luke tells us how, having called a tax collector, Levi, into discipleship, 'now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to follow him'. Remember how, when Levi left behind his toll booth and immediately followed Jesus' invitation to discipleship, he gave a banquet for Jesus and invited all his colleagues along? Then Jesus had explained to the grumbling Pharisees, 'I have come not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance'. That call had been successful: those who found themselves on the margins of faith, who did not try and quench their thirst from the rivers of cheap grace, came and were transformed by Jesus' call to believe and follow, drank deeply from the waters of new birth.

Luke tells two stories. Both are little vignettes, opening a window into the heart of God. Both are introduced by a genuine possibility of choice for the hearer: 'which of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost'. Which of you does not react in this extravagant way, Jesus asks? This is not a rhetorical question expecting the answer, 'everyone will, of course', because clearly not everyone will act in this way. Leaving behind 99 sheep in the wilderness, where they are likely to come under attack from all the kinds of dangers that are to be found there, is not a logical way to go out and mount a rescue operation. Most shepherds would cut their losses, Jesus implies, and leave the one sheep behind for the sake of the welfare of the whole flock. Indeed, the Pharisees who grumbled that 'this fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them', are the very people who leave behind the one lost sheep in order to maintain the integrity of the flock. There is no costly risk-taking among them, and

there is also no rejoicing. Just as in the stories of the rich young man and the lawyer, Jesus gives them a choice. 'Which of you would not react in this way?', he asks, expecting them to say, 'not we'.

Yet the extravagant love of God is such, Jesus tells in this story, that he would leave behind all his sheep in order to search out the one, and then, having searched and left the flock to its own devices, find the lost animal, place it on his shoulders and give a great feast for his friends: 'there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents', Jesus pointedly tells his hearers, 'than over 99 righteous persons who', like the Pharisees who listen to the story, 'need no repentance'. The righteous may share in the rejoicing that others are brought to righteousness, receive the grace that transforms lives. But the righteous may not rejoice in their own righteousness. The 99 sheep are left to their own devices with the shepherd setting out to seek the one lost member of the flock. God's love calls us to leave the safety of the flock behind, and search diligently for that which was lost. And to share with joy with all in the conversion of the lost by feasting together: 'This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them' versus 'rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost'.

And who would not be like the woman, 'having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house and search carefully until she find it'? Again, Jesus does not expect the answer: all of us. Few people, in fact, is the answer to his question. The woman goes to great efforts to find the one coin: turning the house upside down, bringing light into the dark corners, sweeping it out – all to find what has been lost. In like wise Jesus turned the house of Israel upside down, our story tells, bringing light to the darkness of sin, sweeping away the accretions and self-righteousness. Not many are like that woman, certainly not those whose interest lies in preserving the status quo. If you don't want your life, your home, turned upside down by a busybody householder who forensically searches all, sheds light in all our darkneses, then following Jesus is not for you. Jesus brings light and order to the house, that is true. But that light and order comes at the cost of breaking all the habits that prefer darkness and mess. The coin is found, the house swept clean where people allow Jesus into their homes and lives, and in the same way 'there is joy in the presence of the angels over one sinner who repents'.

This is costly grace. It costs us our habits, our comfort, our all, Bonhoeffer explains: 'costly grace is the hidden treasure in the field for the sake of which people go and sell with joy everything they have. It is the costly pearl for whose price the merchant sells all that he has; it is Christ's sovereignty, for the sake of which you tear out an eye if it causes you to stumble'. Costly grace is the grace we receive when we let our lives be transformed by the encounter with the living God who came to look for us, leaving behind the 99 others. Costly grace is the grace by which we are caught up in the broom of the living God, who swept away the darkness and mess of our sin and instead offers us order and life. 'It is the call of Jesus Christ, which causes a disciple to leave his nets and follow him'. Why is it costly? Because it costs God much to show such extravagant love to those who are lost – think of the shepherd leaving behind his flock – and it costs the lost their previous lives – think of the tax collector leaving behind his livelihood, the fishermen their nets, business, even their family and employees.

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Bonhoeffer concludes his observation of the cost of being found: 'It is costly, because calls to discipleship; it is grace because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ. It is costly because it costs people their lives; it is grace because it makes them live. Above all, grace is costly, because it was costly to God, because it costs God the life of God's Son'. This extravagant love is offered to us freely by the God who lets go of all in order to call us, find us and bring us home. In the week ahead I encourage you to reflect on three things:

- Think about what still blocks the way to joy-filled following of Jesus' call? Do you perhaps feel bereft because God's extravagant love is directed to others as well as you? What does it feel like to be a part of the 99 sheep in the wilderness as the shepherd sets out to seek the lost? Does the grumbling of the Pharisees chime a chord in you? If so, what is it that you need to let go in order to share wholeheartedly in the joyful celebration of the God who searches out the lost? What would it look like to share with joy in the God of grace?
- Think about whether you are in fact striving too hard to deserve grace, when grace comes freely. Do you exert 'strength, effort and discipline which is unnecessary, even dangerous, since everything is already prepared and fulfilled by grace'. Are you standing at the fringes of God's banquet looking in on the sinners and tax collectors and thinking, 'this fellow welcomes them and eats with them'? Do you think you do not deserve free grace, or do you feel that you are, in fact, entitled to God's grace? What does it look like to accept the free costly grace that gives us life and costs our lives?
- And finally, think about what may stand between you and the life-giving love of God. What is it that would make you refuse the woman sweeping clean your home, and bringing light to the dark corners of your lives; what may it be that prevents you from allowing yourself to be swept up in her broom and found? What is it that you need strengthen, lighten up in order to let yourself be gathered up in God's rejoicing over a person swept clean from sin and suffering?

'Costly grace is the incarnation of God', Bonhoeffer concludes: it is God becoming human so we may become God's children. 'You were bought with a price', Bonhoeffer reminds us, 'because nothing can be cheap to us which is costly to God. Above all, it is grace because the life of God's Son was not too costly for God to give, in order to make us live. God did, indeed, give him up for us'. Which one of us, then, would reject the shepherd that comes to search for you, would not let their home be swept clean and lit as the householder woman searches for her lost coin. 'Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents', Jesus told them.

STUDY QUESTIONS LENTEN STUDIES, STUDY THREE

LAST WEEK'S REVIEW QUESTIONS FROM THE DEAN

(You may choose to answer these questions at the end of the study, rather than at the beginning).

1. How do we show forth the kind of love that God has for us in our lives?
2. What are the things that need shifting in your lives that hold you back from showing forth that love to others?
3. What are the areas in your life, where you find it difficult to hear God's invitation to discipleship?

4. Read Luke 15:1-7

- (a) Why were the Pharisees grumbling?
- (b) Are we in the twenty first century guilty of similar grumbling? If so, in what way or ways are we so guilty – can you give examples?
- (c) Reflect on the people ministered to at the cathedral/your situation. What parts of Jesus' parable might refer to them and/or to us?
- (d) In his sermon the Dean suggested that "Which of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it?" (vs. 4) is **not** a rhetorical question demanding the answer "everyone will of course". Do you agree? If so, why? If not, why not?
- (e) In his sermon, the Dean explained that the "abundant, extravagant love of God" is called "grace". Bonhoeffer explains that grace has a cost. The extravagant love of God is given freely, but responding to that grace/love is *costly*. How is grace displayed in this parable and what is its cost?

5. Read Luke 15:8-10

- (a) In what ways (if any) is the message of this parable different from the message of the "Lost Sheep"?
- (b) Where is the extravagant grace in this parable?

Questions posed by the Dean at the end of his sermon:

- Think about what still blocks the way to joy-filled following of Jesus' call? Do you perhaps feel bereft because God's extravagant love is directed to others as well as you? What does it feel like to be a part of the 99 sheep in the wilderness as the shepherd sets out to seek the lost? Does the grumbling of the Pharisees chime a chord in you? If so, what is it that you need to let go in order to share wholeheartedly in the joyful celebration of the God who searches out the lost? What would it look like to share with joy in the God of grace?
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even dangerous, since everything is already prepared and fulfilled by grace'. Are you standing at the fringes of God's banquet looking in on the sinners and tax collectors and thinking, 'this fellow welcomes them and eats with them'? Do you think you do not deserve free grace, or do you feel that you are, in fact, entitled to God's grace? What does it look like to accept the free costly grace that gives us life and costs our lives?

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Prayer

*O God, the strength of all those who put their trust in you: mercifully accept our prayers, and because through the weakness of our mortal nature we can do nothing good without you, grant us the help of your grace, that in keeping your commandments we may please you both in will and deed; through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen***