

## Grace or The Road to Damascus Can Lead Well Beyond Damascus

It being Pentecost time, which in the New Testament introduces us to the career of St. Paul and his collection of letters – I thought I should say something about his famous *Letter to the Romans* regarding what Christians call Grace. [And by the way, when I talk of St. Paul it becomes less a lecture and more a performance.]

In my day, which includes a long stretch through the years before Vatican II, we thought of Grace as a “thing” or “power” *received* – like an interest free loan from the treasury of Christ’s inexhaustible merits whereby we could grow in virtue and be saved. It was something we either had or did not have (like having the loan called in, as it were) depending on our behavior. Hence the long lines on Saturdays outside the confessionals in church, people hoping to retrieve God’s Grace or loan or status before God that they had lost through sin.

But before I speak of Paul’s *Letter to the Romans*, I want to start off with a summary of a short story by the Irish writer James Joyce. Its title happens to be simply: *Grace*. And it presents in a subtly amusing (Irish) way, a misunderstanding of Grace that I among many grew up with.

The story is to be found in Joyce’s 1914 publication titled *Dubliners*. It’s about a commercial tea salesman named Tom Kernan. He is a convert to Catholicism by way of his marrying a Catholic wife – and therefore still somewhat uninformed about his new faith. He is also an alcoholic – so that the story begins with his falling down a flight of steps at a pub and landing quite helpless on a lavatory floor, face downwards. He has bitten off the end of his tongue and is bleeding.

He is helped by bystanders and made presentable. A constable arrives followed by a Mr. Power who claims to be Tom’s friend and offers to see him home – where his wife of some twenty- five years of marriage faces up to her usual task of sobering him up. So much for the opening scenes of the story!

Next we find Mr. Power and three other concerned fellows, led by a do-gooder named Martin Cunningham, attempting to straighten Tom out by having him attend a Catholic retreat designed for businessmen. The retreat master will be Fr. Purdon, well respected by such laymen. He speaks in business terms, which they can understand. He’s no fire and brimstone preacher. He behaves quite rationally. He is all business about sin – not overdoing it as a moral problem. He honors their commercial calling. Let’s listen to his comforting words. His opening text is: *For the children of this world are wiser in their generation than the children of light* (so he starts off with a compliment to his audience). *Wherefore make unto yourselves friends with the mammon of iniquity* (meaning morally we have much to learn from Wall Street investors and CPA’s).

He admits it was a hard text to square with the Gospels . . . But he tells his hearers: *the text had seemed to him specially adapted for the guidance of those whose lot it was to lead the life of the world and who yet wished to lead that life not in the manner of worldlings. It was a text for businessmen and professional men. Jesus Christ . . . understood that all men were not called to religious life, that by far the vast majority were forced to live in the world, and . . . for the world . . . He told his hearers that he was there that evening for no terrifying, no extravagant purpose; but as a man of the world speaking to his fellow men. He came to speak to businessmen . . . in a businesslike way. If he might use a metaphor . . . he was their spiritual accountant: he wished . . . everyone of his hearers to open his books, the books of his spiritual life, and see if they tallied accurately with conscience.*

*Jesus Christ was not a hard taskmaster. He understood our little failings, understood the weakness of our poor fallen nature, understood the temptations of this life. We might have had . . . our failings. But one thing only, he said, he would ask his hearers. And that was: to be straight and manly with God. If their accounts tallied in every point to say: "Well, I have verified my account. I find all well."*

*But if, as might happen, there were some discrepancies, to admit the truth, to be frank and say like a man: "Well, I have looked into my accounts. I find this wrong and this wrong. But, with God's grace, I will rectify this and this. I will set right my accounts."*

The story ends on this note. The Gospels are all about accountability as in money and property matters and Jesus is a benign accountant who knows human weakness and advises balancing one's moral books. You all understand how to do that, right? as if - at life's end angelic accountants will go over your records – and determine what level of reward or penalty you will deserve. Jurisprudence rules the afterlife even as it dominates life itself.

### **Which leads us to Saul of Tarsus who will become St. Paul:**

Saul was a first century Jewish Pharisee who lived within an extremely jurisprudent environment. The Law of Moses, the whole tradition of that Torah, was the orthodox framework within which he and the Jewish people fashioned their lives and hopes. It was their security, behaviorally, ritually and socially. The very architecture of its central place of worship, its Temple, demonstrated that. At its top was the veiled Holy of Holies where God was invisibly and unapproachably located; then came the priestly sanctuary of its religious ceremonies, then at a lower level came the courtyard of laymen; then at another level the courtyard of Hebrew women; finally the outer court – at a farther distance – where Gentiles might gather - society structured as the Law required,

with hard and fast distinctions designed to keep God's people safe, correct, distant from the paganism, the chaos of the wider world beyond. It was a world of do's and don't's down to washing one's hands, lifting not a hammer on the Sabbath, avoiding certain foods as well as alien households – whereby its adherents remained a “holy” people morally, ritually, unprofane; i.e. good not bad.

Such sanctuaries were also constructed by other nations who personalized the many things of nature such as the sun and moon and stars or the sea or a mountain top or a human monarch as gods – their lives cramped by things that were inferior to human nature and such a misunderstanding of nature and humanity's worth was *also* institutionalized by the Laws that ruled such Gentile nations.

And let me repeat: such Laws, be they Jewish or Gentile, were essentially designed to keep people safe, insure them against the chaos (or hell) that would follow if such institutions were swept away. The Law was a guarantee of social safety, which word in religious vocabulary could mean: salvation. The Law was our means of salvation.

So no wonder did this Saul go viral when this new Christian movement of Jewish converts were preaching a new Gospel – that declared that salvation meant so much more than just safety – and what's more, that such salvation was now open to even *aliens* who had never shared Israel's privileged history. Indeed Saul was deputized by the Temple leaders of Jerusalem to arrest such renegades, which he did vehemently – even to witnessing the stoning of an outspoken Christian Jew named Stephen.

And then something happened to Saul on the road to Damascus; he suddenly became Paul. It's hard to say what it was. One can speculate. He had a faint remembrance of a voice saying something like: it is useless for you to kick against the spur.

Over time he may have been exposed to the teachings of the crucified “heretic” Jesus – about the Law being good but only as a kind of elementary school; from which people were called to graduate to a capacity for good almost beyond bounds, like turning the other cheek, going an extra mile, being merciful even as God was merciful – which suggested that while God could be imagined as a lawgiver – and judge – God might better be understood as a boundless ocean of Mercy, Care, Grace, Love.

In other words this Jesus movement's mission was to inaugurate an era of universal, imaginative human graciousness that carried us well beyond mere obedience and fear. Paul's inherited Judaism already *knew* that – as evident in the New Covenant foretold by Jeremiah and in the Book of Job, which actually

questioned the quid pro quo, eye for an eye justice of the Law as then understood.

Which brings us to Paul's *Letter to the Romans* – as the best way of tracing the radical turn of his thinking. He knows that some Hebrews have become Christian but hesitantly – out of centuries of loyalty to their heritage of the Mosaic Law and their Temple and their reverence toward a nameless God. They would like to retain much of their past – including distancing from Gentile Christians; they expected some customs to be retained. And they were influencing Gentile Christians to share their hesitancy – to value traditional recipes for goodness rather than this new creed's enthusiastic novelties. It was to such an audience in Rome that Paul wrote that bombshell of an epistle that from age to age explodes the complacency into which Christianity and humanity itself can sink.

**The thrust of the Letter: chapters 1 to 8:** the beginning theme being: *despite all legal systems guaranteeing safety and justice, the world is still going to hell.* (I mean: consider the chaos of the recent twentieth century.)

Paul opens this letter with an assessment of society in general. [This is what turns off many who are led to think that Paul is a grump who sees no good in anyone – indeed extremely strict – a pessimist, when it is his irrepressible optimism regarding the human race that makes him confront a status quo that breeds disaster over and over again.] Elsewhere Paul says: the Law is holy, the commandment is holy and righteous and good but a kind of treadmill as far as transforming the human race.

And so he says: you think the Law is the solution to human vulnerability? Let's take a candid look at society and history. The human race is perpetually "missing the mark" (as on a target) which is what the Greek word *hamartia* means – sin. Whereas the human race is marvelously endowed intellectually, it is falling short in every way and why? Because by their misunderstanding of *true* God, a God who is true in the sense of unswervingly *true-blue* – they misunderstand everything (their whole house of cards collapses) even (in Paul's *first century opinion*) matters of sex. They mistake idols, images of animals as images of God. They exchange the reality of God for the likeness of a mortal man or birds or bulls or even snakes. With minds like that they fall a notch *into* animals *themselves*: they become full of greed, malice, envy, murder, rivalry (party politics?). They talk chaff instead of charity; are insolent, haughty, senseless, faithless, heartless – and though they know that such behaviors lead to disaster they not only perform them but *applaud* those who do; celebrities. (His list could stand as a summary of today's daily news and much of its entertainment – violent.)

Now any member of Paul's own tribe would applaud such an appraisal of the Gentile world. But Paul immediately turns on any cheering kinsman and says: *And you! you are without excuse; in judging others should you not judge yourself.*

If God were a judge (and I mean *if*) he would summon you as well as any Gentile before his tribunal for offenses committed. He goes on to say: if all you do is hear the Law but don't observe it, you are in the same boat with the rest of the human race. If you consider yourself a trainer of the foolish, a teacher of the simpleminded (as have some Catholics I have known, of which I was one); if you claim the authority to teach others how to think and behave – have you been living your own lecture? So, he says, are we better off? Not entirely. Whether Jew or Gentile (and we may insert here other distinctions as to race and ethnicity) we all behave the same – and scandalize others.

And here comes the climax of his survey. Paul proves his point – like a good rabbi - by quoting excerpts from the psalms regarding the human race: *“their throats are an open grave”*; *“the venom of asps is on their tongues”* ; *“their feet are quick to shed blood”*; *“there is no fear of God before their eyes”*. In other words, we are in bad shape *from head to toe*, anatomically speaking – despite the Law that would correct such behavior.

And here comes Paul's bombshell conclusion. It becomes evident that *no human being can hope to be justified before men or God by observing the Law*, try as they might. The role of the Law is magisterial: it exists fundamentally to make us conscious that we are somehow missing the mark – our true destiny. As such the Law is, as we have said, *holy, the commandment is holy and righteous and good*; but humanity remains a hard nut to crack. The law is like a stop sign that details human behavior, good and bad, and that's all it does; we turn it into a dead letter; it becomes a slippery slope; as creatures we don't change; read the history books, watch the prime time TV dramas: Perry Mason, Law and Order, trial after trial, fictional or factual.

To put all this in his own words again: *the law is addressed to those under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world stand accountable to God, since no human being will be justified in his sight by observing the law; for through the law comes (ultimately only) consciousness of sin*. That is its role.

### The Impact

I remember when I first heard Fr. Lyonnet, my Jesuit teacher at the Biblical Institute in Rome – make that point, I felt like the ground I stood on was falling away beneath my feet – that Paul had kicked away the only method I had by which to save my soul, to climb my way into heaven or sanctity. Where do I go from there? The law places a demand on me-and-my-behavior - to be saved, as does any test that I might take to make a grade. Now he tells me I can't pass the test anyway, that it's full of trick questions. All my props, my moral infrastructure seemed swept away, my account book stamped: irrelevant. It was like experiencing a free fall within an empty, directionless universe.

Yet strangely enough – after a moment – anxiety gave way to a sense of relief, like feeling I had laid down a cross, a weight . . . like what I was beginning to hear

was that *God is not a judge, isolated in his holy of holies, and life is not a cosmic courtroom trial. A threshold opened up: that God was all Grace; that Grace was not a "call in" loan; that a world of Grace, graciousness lay outside our courtroom; a universe emerging from that thing called Love, the anticipation that I was on the threshold to something really New as in the expression a New Testament.* God was a Good Samaritan, the Father of the prodigal son, who makes his sun to rise on the bad and the good, who sends his rain to fall upon the just and the unjust. A world of Grace whose very Origin is Grace (so feminine a word); a gracious universe and graceful sun and moon and stars and trees and landscapes and a riot of graceful beings began to rise up . . . a kind of fresh air of what Paul called in Greek *parresia* – freedom, permission to speak without fear and live poetically, carefully with the emphasis on *caring* about things, including myself – instead of hiding, lying, always on guard.

Was this what happened to Saul on the road to Damascus – renaming him, recreating him as Paul – the author of such convictions as when he says: *there remain these three: faith, hope and love and the greatest of these is love* – the most cosmic atmosphere of all can be love and is love? It is the air we breathe – so why are we so breathless?

What triggered this breakthrough in history? It was something about the nature of the anointed Nazarene whom the Law put to death essentially because he was good . . . too good . . . because of his unveiling of God as Good, gracious, in no way vindictive! As Paul says: for all who can believe it, there is no distinction; all who have been deprived of the true wonder of God (and Reality) are made free of this treadmill way of being, by the ransom Christ paid in blood – as a key to the very nature of God who bleeds for us everyday – unlike the gods we knew.

And here in chapter five of his letter I heard the most pivotal of words where Paul says: *therefore, since we have been justified by faith, by this event of Jesus Christ, we have peace (shalom) with God . . . **we have gained access to this grace in which we stand** . . . !* Fr. Lyonnet then explained that word access – in Greek: *prosagoge* – in terms of that very Temple of Jerusalem that housed God invisibly within its veiled Holy of Holies. That inner sanctum had been accessible only to Israel's High Priest on the day of Yom Kippur – the annual day of Atonement – when the Jewish people opened its books, repented of its failings and was absolved for another year. It's the very thing Fr. Purdon advised his Irish business men to do during his retreat – to clean up their accounts – to avoid damnation.

So what is implied when I am told I have **access** to this grace in which I stand? First, metaphorically and therefore truly speaking, the once **off limit, divisive courtyards of the Temple become now wide open to me and you** – as expressed in the Letter to the Ephesians: *For he is our peace, he who . . . broke down the dividing wall of enmity* and again as expressed in his Letter to the Galatians: *now . . . there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free,*

*there is not male nor female; for you are all one . . . walls become obsolete, reminders of ignorance and fear.*

**Indeed access to the very *Holy of Holies*** is opened to me – the Holy of Holies no longer an ominous space – loaded with the fearful presence of God. Come in says the Presence of the Origin of the universe; feel at home; don't be afraid; welcome; learn something about divine Grace – in the sense of “I care about you; my universe cares about you; *experience* care; learn how to care – universal, boundless caritas.” Or as Jesus said it (and as the resident of that Holy of Holies also says it): *Come unto me, all you who labor and are heavy burdened, and I will give you rest; . . . For my yoke (my Gospel) is easy and my burden light.* The veil that once excluded you from proximity to and intimacy with the Source of all being – has been torn from top to bottom. The inner sanctum is no longer a closed space but has actually become a vast outdoors, leading us from one horizon of discovery after another - time after time. All the energy you poured into trying to climb that slippery slope – is now yours to apply extravagantly to becoming grace yourself.

So now you can see how Paul was no pessimist – but so optimistic as to climax Romans chapter 8 in such terms:

*. . . now there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the spirit of life [that vital spirit] in Christ Jesus has freed you from the law of sin and death. For what the law, weakened by the flesh, was powerless to do, this God has done. If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but handed him over for us all, how will he not also give us everything else along with him? Who will bring a charge against God's chosen ones? It is God who acquits us. Who will condemn . . . What will separate us from the love of Christ? Will anguish, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or the sword? . . . For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor present things, nor future things, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature will be able to separate us from the love of God as revealed in (the manner and parables and healings, the style of) Christ Jesus our Lord.*

You may ask, how can this thing or this Source of all things called grace, Gracious Being, change our world. Well, elsewhere Paul explains: as **yeast** (namely you, as yeast) applied to every current human institution, large or small, fermenting them all into - Bread and Wine (1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 5:7). In the kingdom of Grace the Law becomes choreography; the Law becomes a musical score; Grace becomes the Rule.

Postscript:

At this point let's return to James Joyce's short story called *Grace*.

We saw how Fr. Purdon during his businessmen's retreat was gracious and kind enough not to worry the congregation before him. How? By translating the

Gospel's and St. Paul's understanding of Grace into a jurisprudence or accountability issue: namely that all they had to do was "open their books" - as we used to examine our consciences - as they would do in an audit or before a tax collector and show that their behavior tallied well with God's law – or if it did not, that a correction of their behavior might resolve such errors – ending with their accounts "set right" – books balanced, one's return to what we called the "state" of Grace, dues paid.

But Joyce must have known what Paul meant by Grace – insofar as slipping into his story – right at the beginning - he mentions a young man in a cycling-suit who *cleared his way through the ring of bystanders* around the prostrate Tom Kernan. *He knelt down promptly beside the injured man and called for water. The constable knelt down also to help. The young man washed the blood from the injured man's mouth and then called for some brandy . . . until a (barman) came running with the glass. The brandy was forced down the man's throat [a kind of Eucharist?]. In a few seconds he opened his eyes . . . You're all right now? Asked the young man in the cycling-suit . . . He was helped to his feet . . The young man in the cycling-suit took the man by the . . . arm and the crowd divided.* At this the young man in the cycling-suit disappears from the story.

From my point of view the young man is Joyce's adaptation of the Good Samaritan of the Gospel who as an alien (unclean by purity rules) comes upon a beaten up Jewish traveler and takes pity on him: *He . . . bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper. 'Look after him,' he said, 'and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.'* In a word, he behaved as does the Source of our very universe – as persistently gracious, caring – as we were created to be.

Already, at the very beginning of his story Joyce displays by way of the young man in the cycling-suit the image of a Good Samaritan to manifest what Grace is in the Gospel sense - as divinely generous, not static or conditional – in contrast to Fr. Purdon's too, too juridical and worrisome and impersonal concept of Grace.

Amazing grace! How sweet the sound  
That saved a wretch like me!  
I once was lost, but now am found;  
Was blind, but now I see.

Through many dangers, toils and snares,  
I have already come;  
'Tis grace hath brought me safe thus far,  
And grace will lead me home.