

GRACE 1 (9 January 2025)

SUMMARY: The meeting focused on the concept of grace, exploring its meaning and significance in Greco-Roman culture and in selected biblical texts. Participants discussed the Greek roots of "charis," which means love and generosity, and its connection to biblical grace. They delved into the distinction between living under law and grace, emphasizing that grace is a freely given gift that enables transformation and generosity. The conversation also touched on the role of faith in accepting grace, the importance of affirmation in church communities, and the significance of Christ's suffering as an act of solidarity. The group agreed to continue these discussions monthly, first Thursdays, starting on 6 February.

Alison (City URC), Antonia (St Mary's, joining us from Portugal), Fred (City URC), Katie (Canton), Ken (Canton), Leo (Canton), Marieke (Canton), Tom (Canton)

Tom (after introductions): In this first workshop on Grace what we are going to look at is the basic meaning of the word grace, first as it was used in the Greco-Roman culture of New Testament times, as it was used in the letters of Paul (he uses this word about 100 times as I remember), but then also as we, the 8 of us, have perceived it and understand it. So we are going to be talking about our vocabulary.

First, the Greek word used in the New Testament is "charē". That's close to the Welsh female given name "Carys". What does "Carys" mean?

Antonia: "Love".

Tom: Yes, right. And we can see how that word for love relates to the word "charity", which is another kind of love, an act of love, a social kind of love. And there is the word "care" or "caring" that also belongs to this family of words.

What other kinds of words do we have for "love"?

Antonia: "Agape".

Tom: Yes that is another Greek word for another kind of love. Agapē is the unselfish love we have for others in community, as at an "agape feast" or as Christ's love for others, the basic Christian form of love, and then there is 'philo", as in philosophy, which is the love of wisdom, or Philadelphia, which means brotherly love. Eros" is, well, erotic love, and then there is "charē", which is an act of caring for another, charitable love, which in Latin is "gratia". Maybe you could say agapē is the feeling and charē is acting out that feeling.

In Greek the word for grace, "charē", is related to the word for rejoicing, which is "chairo" and joy, which is "chara". All this love and rejoicing lies behind the Welsh name "Carys". In Luke there is the rejoicing of the shepherds at the birth of Jesus, which comes like grace as an unexpected gift of God's love, and, later, in Luke 15 Jesus is criticized for his acceptance of the tax collectors and sinners, but he tells a parable about the rejoicing at finding the lost sheep, and the in the parable about a lost coin Jesus compares the woman's rejoicing at find it to the rejoicing "of the angels of God over one sinner who repents." Without using the word "grace" Luke talks a lot about the joy of receiving grace.

Now in the blurb I sent out about this workshop I spoke about how the word was used in Greco-Roman culture to describe a particular kind of relationship called "patronage"--the relationship between the patrician class and the plebians.

Fred: That was the word that sparked my interest the night before. I hadn't previously heard the connection between grace and patronage and found that very interesting.

Ken: I think this is very helpful because when I was a kid "grace" meant "For what we are about to receive may we be truly thankful."

Tom: Yes, that's the rejoicing.

Ken: Well, I didn't understand that.

Tom: What was your understanding?

Ken: I think it was a complete misunderstanding. In Italian and Spanish, you have "gratia" and so on, the thanks you give because of your gratitude, but this is just the thanks rather than the free will offering.

Tom: Good question. It's the relationship. It's thanks for something that comes unexpected, freely, the joy of recognizing a gift.

Ken: I'm getting to understand that now.

Tom: That is a wonderful example of what we are about to look at, because it's only when you're aware of the confusion that you know the kind of questions that are going to get you out of it. Has anyone else had that question?

Katie: What was the relationship between the patron and the client? If the client did something in expectation of employment, was there a "covenant" relationship between the patron and the client, was there an expectation that the patron would supply employment, or was it completely optional on their part?

Tom: It was completely optional. The power was in the patron's hands.

Let's look at slide one, the beginning of Luke, which is a kind of dedication of the Gospel to a patron named Theophilus, which means "lover of God"--which may have been a made-up name. There are two different ways of reading what we see here. First, Theophilus was already the patron, and Luke was writing this as part of his obligation to his patron, or secondly, Luke was writing this in expectation that Theophilus would notice it and take him on as a client. I know an author in the seventeenth century who wrote dedications to Lord so-and-so in one book after another, but it took years before this Lord responded with patronage.

Katie: What could the potential client do to ensure they attracted patronage?

Tom: They could make themselves known through dedications like this or through some intermediary. Maybe you performed some notable public service or had been in the military. It was a very unequal relationship in which the patron held all the cards. Their willingness to

be patrons may depend on how much honour, publicity, exposure they might get, or maybe there were material benefits.

Fred: It reminds me of the opening scene in *The Godfather* in which all these men are pledging complete loyalty to the Godfather as they congratulate him at his daughter's wedding.

Tom: Yes, right. This is a direct cultural inheritance from the Greco-Roman world of the New Testament. And we see it illustrated today in the way Donald Trump has taken control over the Republican party, the same fear, the same need to protect one's client status for one's own survival. If you step out of line, you are ruined. And he's been able to pull the whole country into this fear, abandoning care of the poor, the refugee, LGBTQ, inclusion and diversity, the environment, because if they don't, they will be ruined. Insecurity makes this system work. The system is set up with the patron, the patrician, in the power seat.

Katie: Gift-giving(?)

Tom: Katie's daughter Isla gave a sermon last summer in which she spoke of the gift-giving culture in the Indian, Native American, First Nation people in Canada. Someone of importance in the community would hold what they called a "potlach", a lavish community feast in which gave gifts to the guests to achieve status and power in the community. Prominent families would compete with one another in the lavishness of these feasts until they got quite out of hand and impoverishing the communities the government had to step in to put a stop to them.

Leo: As you were saying at the beginning, you dedicate your work to Lord such-and-such, and that is your gratitude for the support that has been given. You are acknowledging the gift.

Tom: You give a gratuity---acknowledging the gift that you have been given. There is that reciprocity. But is that enough? The patron gets publicity honour, reputation.

Leo: When you say gratia, gratia, that is acknowledging the grace you have been given.

Tom: Yes. Marieke?

Marieke: In a Greek taverna, they bring you a bowl of bread and glass of water before you order. It's like an announcement of the graciousness of the establishment for which you will later express your gratitude. Reciprocity.

Tom: Yes, reciprocity is the key. We become part of a graceful relationship. I think we're all familiar with what would become the theological meaning of grace from Paul's letters to the Corinthians and the Galatians, the Philippians and the Romans. Paul is our first New Testament author, though there are bits he quotes from an already developing literature about Christ, as we will see later, an earlier layer. Let's look at his mature understanding in his last letter, Romans 6:14 and following:

"Sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under the law but under grace. What then? Should we sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means! "

Do we have impunity to do what we like if we live under a loving, freely given grace? Is grace a get out of jail free card? Trump's presidential pardon? Paul says No. Look at verse 22: "But now that you have been freed from sin and enslaved to God, the advantage you get is sanctification." What does sanctification mean?

Leo: To be made holy?

Tom: Right, we have been made holy; we do what God wants, as a matter of the heart, not because we are being obedient. God puts the bread and the glass of water on the table and in your heart, you rejoice, you want to leave a tip, right? It's not the letter of the law but the love that lies at the heart of the law. Bob Dylan has a song, "You Gotta Serve Somebody . . . Myself, I want to serve the Lord." It's all about service that is the same as rejoicing. Not fear. We get swept up in the grace. It becomes who we are. We are "sanctified".

So, this business of a difference between law and grace is presented as the difference between doing something that you are told to do and doing something because you want to do it.

We're used to this tension. Paul insists on grace as this thing that comes to us unmerited, that it comes undeserved, gratis. In Romans 11:6 he says, "But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works, otherwise grace would no longer be grace." It's no longer gracious, a freebee. We always have to come back to the cultural inheritance, the meaning of the word in Paul's Greco-Roman cultural context, and Paul is using it to make sense of this Jesus event. There is no Christian "theology" yet. There is a Jewish understanding of the nature of humanity and God, an inheritance that has largely come down in story form, and it, too, in the Greco-Roman world was beginning to be influenced by philosophical discourse, but theology as such was embryonic. The thinking that became Christian theology was largely influenced, they say, by Second Temple Judaism, which didn't win out over Rabbinic Judaism, but that's a complicated story. Excuse me for bringing it up. But Paul is groping with the language available to him to make sense of the experience, the Christ event. We always have to remember this provisional sense when we try to think systematically.

As we're starting out--Fred, you brought up the Godfather story--we discovered it was not a very convenient image to use for what we may like to understand as the Christian way. Something in the meaning has to shift.

Katie: Isn't it just a different emphasis, though, that we should look at it with a different lens. Instead of looking at the gift requiring a response, we can see the gift as enabling a response.

Leo: If we think of the law we think of the threat of punishment if we fail to respond, while grace enables a response.

Katie: I think acceptance has to come in. If the Mafia that model whatever you do there is always going to be violence. There is no way out. But under grace there is always a way out.

Tom: A constant way out.

Katie: A constant way out.

Antonia: I was just thinking of the acceptance part of that, because freedom of will comes into it. God gives us freedom to choose. Grace comes to us and we don't have to do anything.

Like in our capitalist society it's transactional. This is just what's coming into my mind as you were speaking.

Tom: Yeah, I think we should hold on to that, because it could come into our discussion later. How would you say that in one sentence?

Antonia: Yes--grace is not just about the provider, but it's about the receiver.

Tom: Marieke, could you write that down so that we have it? Because that's a very central question. But to go back to the question about sanctification, does anyone have a Bible with them. Could you look up 2 Corinthians 9:9-12?

Katie (reading): "As it is written,

*He scatters abroad; he gives to the poor;
his righteousness^l endures forever.*

He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness. You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity, which will produce thanksgiving to God through us, for the rendering of this ministry not only supplies the needs of the saints but also overflows with many thanksgivings for the grace of God in you. Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift."

Tom: In a nutshell, God's generosity to the poor is like seed that grows and blooms with continuing generosity. But specifically, as God's grace toward us is activated in our own lives, we become generous in that way. Thanksgiving overflows in continuing thanksgiving, as we learn to be gracious ourselves.

Paul is appealing to the Corinthians to be generous in participating in the collection he is organizing for the poor, marginalised Christians of Jerusalem. Their generosity will be seen as the grace ("charis") of God that is with them, or, in Katie's translation, because of the richness of the grace that God has imparted to you. The "Thanks" here in the "Thanks be to God" is "charis". So here you have grace both as the act of giving and grace as the thanks for that giving, their gracious, charitable giving being described as the grace of God that is with them, and then a summary thanks going to God, not just for the gift that will be given but for the immeasurable gift of a generosity that God's and the Corinthians' all at the same time.

Do you see what he is doing here? Our generosity, our grace, God's grace in us provokes thanksgiving and further generosity in others.

Katie: A funnel. We don't hold onto it. It just keeps giving. It goes through us. So those who receive don't praise us. They praise God in their own giving.

Leo: You're a funnel. You don't just fill one jar with grain and say no more, so throw that funnel away.

Tom: Ha ha! Yeah, we don't often think of ourselves as a funnel. More like a bowl with no hole in the bottom. It just stays with us. It's there for us to grab. But to become part of the generosity God is in us and we become part of the Christ event. Does that make sense to us?

Fred: This may be going off on a tangent, but, unlike the Mafia boss, there's no material reciprocity, no quid pro quo, but as God's grace is freely given, undeserved, there is still reciprocity, as we are confirmed in grace, as the funnel, but there is no expectation on God's part that we can ever give back in any material sense. Like sacrifices. We can only give back in love, acts of love. Does that make sense?

Tom: Marieke?

Marieke: I don't know that I can say anything more sensible about this, but it used to be in the Dutch church I belonged to that there would always be an expectation, that God would be your guide through life, that there would be expectations from good Christians that you wouldn't go to the carnival on the weekend. There would just be no way you could do that.

Tom: You're switching from a positive to a negative.

Marieke: No. It's like the grace we understand now is from an all-loving God, and the grace we had then was from an all-loving Father. The church took the position that yes, you are forgiven, but you'd better watch you step, kind of thing.

Katie: Was it the carnival-going that was to receive the goodness that was the grace?

Marieke: I think it was that you were not able to live absorbing the grace, if that makes sense. So it is a restriction on your life. But what I understand now is, to be the best you can be, or to flourish, or to be made in God's image, that is what real grace enables, that is what real understanding of God's grace enables.

Tom: Beautiful.

Katie: Grace enables freedom, as we were talking about being under the law, obedience, grace enables freedom.

Tom: Instead of just ticking off a list, there is imagination and creativity.

Katie: It's joyful.

Tom: Joyful, yeah. . There was a gentleman in a church I served one who was a retired missionary, and we were talking about the story of the woman who was caught in adultery who was about to be stoned to death. Jesus, remember, says Those who are without sin cast the first stone. No one cast a stone, so Jesus says to the woman, Go, and sin no more. We were talking about this as an example of grace. This is grace. Undeserved clemency. But then my friend said, Yes, but he said Sin no more! It's like he wanted to withdraw that unconditional blanket of grace.

For some reason we always want to hold onto that You'd better to the line sort of thing. We keep wanting to go back to that ticking off the list version of righteousness that Jesus wanted to get away from.

There is a section in Galatians where Paul is talking about the experience of his call. He says that God called me through his grace. He was pleased to reveal himself in me, not to me but in me, that I might proclaim him to the Gentiles. This his call to ministry, basically, which,

as a moment of God's grace, is a freedom to be creative, a release from self-concern, from ambition, to realize the deepest dimension of who he is which is not the ego but the Christ in him. This focus not on himself but others is his is the basis of his call to mission among the Gentiles.

Now Marieke, what did you write down about what Antonia said earlier?

Marieke: I hope I got this right. Antonia said Grace is not just about the provider, also about the receiver. And the free will to choose.

Antonia shakes her head in agreement.

Tom: One of the things I think people find it very difficult to understand is that idea that you accept the grace of God by faith. Now what in the world does that mean? I think we have to understand the word "faith". You certainly do have to make a move, and that move is called faith. Faith in what? How does faith activate that relationship, that thing that is required. Does this get into what you were talking about, Antonia? I think from your expression I am missing the mark.

Antonia: No, I was just thinking about what you were saying. I think the receiver, that receiving God's gift is an active thing, and if that receiving is activated by the receiver's faith, then that does make sense to me. Yes.

Tom: In what way? Can you unpack it better than I was doing?

Antonia: The question is, we all have faith in God, in one way or another, we all have an active faith. But how come grace seems to have entered some people's lives more actively than others? You can see it in their caring and generosity and so on? I suppose it is a private, a personal thing, between the individual and God. You know, you can't simply quantify by looking from outside. It's like an old-fashioned TV aerial, you simply receive it. It also comes back to this being sanctified, as we were talking about before, not being sanctified in any holier than thou sort of way, but sanctified in terms of being transformed, wanting to DO God's will? And if you're more receptive to do God's will there is a transformation in that, you become more reflective and coming back to the funnel image there is a sense of movement in that, It's coming in and it's going out. It's a moving thing. It's not static and it's not fixed, it's a dynamic thing that doesn't happen just once. It happens again and again.

And I was thinking, apparently St Augustine said, Love God and do what you want, and I thought, you know, it's a sound silly to do what you want, but if you do love God you're going to do what God wants. If you are sanctified, to get back to that definition, you're going to do what makes you happy and what makes God happy.

Tom: It's something to contemplate when you go home at night. There's a sense of faith that this is the way it's supposed to be.

Katie: Wouldn't it be great if we always knew that.

Tom: No, we don't. We're human beings, so we inevitably do what WE want, without always knowing what God wants, there is always this limitation. We always put it in our own

perspective. It's like you are driving along on the motorway and you think you are going straight, but you're out of alignment so you always have to make these little corrections.

Antonia: So that's where discernment comes in.

Tom: Yeah. This is where the Rite of Reconciliation comes in.

Antonia: Yeah.

Tom: If you really believe in the totally free unmerited gift of grace, and you want to what God wants, you're always aware of this limitation. Faith is aiming toward what you trust in, which is always beyond your own limited perspective, always bigger. And we all do that.

Was it who brought up that we can recognize those who have been more generous and caring. Was it you, Antonia? There might be someone who is very inappropriate in their generosity, missing the mark, who has a very deep faith in terms of trust in that which is beyond themselves. And there may be someone who is doing what looks like all the right things not out of trust or faith but out of legal obedience, and you just don't know that.

Antonia nods in agreement.

Tom: For instance, in church you might have someone who is a good worker who is actually taking over from what the community as the body of Christ ought to be doing. Maybe I'm not making sense anymore.

Antonia: No, it does make sense. It made me think of the Mary and Martha story where Mary is listening to Jesus while Martha is doing all the work. And we see people in the church who seem to do all these things, but here again, who are we to judge that someone is moved by grace or not.

Katie: May I come in here?

Antonia: Yeah, go ahead.

Katie. I want to bring in Martin Luther here. I was listening to a programme on BBC today, called Human Intelligence. It's a series thing by Nami Alderman (<https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/brand/m0026njq>), and she was talking this week about people who disrupt the mysteries through the intelligence of their own imagination. She was talking at length about Luther. And I knew a little bit about his story, but it was wonderful to hear her voice in it. Because she was describing him as a monk who would get distracted from his devotions, and he had a certain number of devotions he would have to do every day, but he was struggling and would put them off so he was in debt, and he kept putting them off and putting them off until he had this huge prayer gap that had to be filled. But there was this system that you could pay other monks to do your devotions so you could catch up with God. But he thought this was a terrible system and he wasn't willing to pay. So, he was praying over twenty hours a day and it wasn't worth it because he could never hope to catch up. So he had to go to his confessor, and they were talking about all this, and he said he wasn't living God anymore. He was actually hating God, with no joy and love in his devotions. And then something happened, and he realized he was enslaved to this God. And that wasn't what Christ waded from him at all, and that Christ had already freed him from any debt he could

have, and from that came the Reformation. I think that may be a way of understanding the works verses grace thing.

Leo: Coming back to that transactional idea, the idea of debt is a kind lawful kind of grace.

Tom; That transactional thing has been a theological battleground from the year Zot. Because things just have to be done.

Katie: What do you mean by things?

To: Looking after people, seeing that justice is being done, that sort of thing, loving and caring, compassion. One of the difficult things for me is that I come from an exceptionally liberal, far left corner of the church, and in my thirty-some years of ministry in the church I always noticed that it was the conservative members of the church who showed up on time and served on committees and gave generously, and it was the liberal members who were always late to meetings, if they came, served reluctantly and gave less. Of course, that is a gross and unfair exaggeration, but there is enough truth in it to make it a recognizable joke. It was the people who were living more legalistically that the church really depended on. I've always wondered how you deal with that. I think in my ministry I've always tried to make the church a fun place to be. Alison may disagree with me, but I think we had a lot of fun together when I was at City Church.

Alison smiles and nods.

Tom: And I think if you are having a lot of fun together you are living graciously and welcoming. Oh, that reminds me. I was talking about City Church with Katie earlier. It was when I was at City Church that we became an open and affirming church, which is becoming quite normal now, but in those days it was quite revolutionary. We were the only one in Wales and in the URC there were only about two, maybe three others. It was against the grain. My point is, if you want to be a church that has grace as its core motive, you have to do so programmatically, consciously, strategically. Our aim was to become open to the gifts of others in membership and leadership regardless of sexual orientation, marital status, race and so on. I had always thought I was a very open person myself, but we took a year of study and learning together before we asked the congregation to vote, and I learned an awful lot about the nature of affirmation, of grace. I was reading a book recently called What's So Amazing about Grae, a 2002 book by Philip Yancy, which is very critical of churches that are very judgemental when they ought to be open. But toward the end of the book he returns to this old palaver about loving the sinner but hating the sin, which, if we look at carefully, we can't, for instance, see someone who has gone through a divorce and the pain and agony of all that as a "sin" needing condemnation, which I think gets into the same territory of hostility to the marginalized; if we look at the person, there's got to be an affirmation of the person who has experience rejection and brokenness. I think that as a church we came to see that the person who is in a same sex relationship as a full person, in the same way that we look at a person in a broken relationship as a full person. Of course there are differences but in terms of affirmation and acceptance they are the same thing, along with people who are struggling with addiction--affirmed as full people, race, affirmed, mental issues, affirmed, class and so on, affirmed. If we don't do that, then how are people ever going to feel the sense of self-affirmation that grace implies, live a self-affirming, grace-shaped life in healthy, gracious and therefore caring relationships? Does that make sense?

Marieke: I think it goes beyond.

Tom: Beyond what?

Marieke: What do you mean by affirmation?

Tom: Affirming a person, saying you are accepted, acceptable.

Marieke: Acceptable? I think God's love goes beyond that.

Tom: OK. How would you say it? I'm sure I agree with you, but how would you put it in words?

Marieke: I think that people on the margins, need to be fully affirmed who they are now, need to have a special place in congregations, intimacy. It's not being accepted like a full person, do you know what I mean?

Tom: It's being welcomed into full participation, in the leadership, in the progress of what we are doing. Does that make sense, Alison, in terms of what we were trying to do?

Alison: Yes. It was quite a process, though.

Tom: Yes, and that was clear in how we developed a process in which everyone could feel free to speak up. It took a long time. Deliberate. There might have been a very small minority that shared a particular point of view, but we tried to create an atmosphere in which everyone felt free to speak up, without judgement, fully. And we could see in the community--that developed a much better sense of community.

I remember that there was once a dialogue arranged in the Upper Room between Steve Best and Russell Davies--that was an achievement in itself!--

Alison: Two extremes.

Tom: Two extremes, yeah. But they wound up agreeing. There was a sense of bias that separated people, so we went through this process until we felt there were no people who were marginalized. We went through this process where we brought marginalized people into the centre, as co-workers in Christ, depending on their perspective to know who we were. That is grace.

Now what were we trying to explain? The theologian Paul Tillich explains that the word "existence" is "to stand outside", two bits in the word, "ex"-out, or stand outside, and "istance", from the Greek word *istēmi*, to stand up. So, the very condition of existence is separation, the experience of standing outside an otherwise unified field. And then if we act to CHOOSE that separation as what we desire, that, Tillich says, is sin. So, existence is separation is sin, in short. Now the work of the church is reconciliation, solidarity, enabling the voiceless, enabling the disabled, all these things aim at overcoming separation. If this is the case, then we no longer see sin as the *transgression* of commandments but as separation.

This means that we do not so much *commit* sins, but we live in a state of sin, a state of separation, estrangement.

The woman at the banquet in Simon's house in the days before Holy Week, you remember, who honours Jesus by pouring a very expensive ointment on his feet and washing them dry with her hair is rejoicing because she has been brought in from separation, as someone who has been affirmed.

Katie: OK, I have a question.

Tom: Yep.

Katie: Is Christ's suffering, crucifixion and suffering--is that really solidarity with our suffering?

Tom: Are you asking me?

Katie: I'd like to hear from the whole group. It's just that we have been talking for an hour about the grace of God, and we haven't really discussed how Jesus fits in with this.

Tom: Yes, that's the whole history of Christianity. Paul says a lot about it, but what he said wasn't a philosophy or theology yet, so it's very different from what we would say today. So what is that?

Katie: Yes, this comes from a time when sacrifice, real *physical* sacrifice, was such a live factor. So, is Christ's suffering merely solidarity with our suffering or is there something else going on there? I'd like to hear what people think about that.

(Pause, silence)

Tom: We have to be aware that in the tenth century the Christ story became interpreted in a very transactional way, of God requiring something totally innocent in language that makes most sense in the legal context of tenth century feudal obligations in what became the familiar atonement story. And it's hard to get away from that because of its present in so many of our old Victorian hymns. What Paul was talking about is something much prior to that.

Fred: The conception of Christ, it is solidarity, but it goes much beyond that.

Tom: How does it go beyond that?

Fred: It was solidarity, yes, taking on the marginalization but not only it was an extreme form of suffering on the cross, taking on the sins of the world, but also much more than that. But also the complexities, fears, temptations, infirmities of humanity. Yes, acts of solidarity, but so much more than that.

Katie: So you are saying that through his violent death he is including everybody, so there is nothing beyond the pale.

Fred: I think . . . There is a passage of scripture that I have found very helpful, from Hebrews, taking on the experiences and infirmities and yet being without sin. And then it goes on, verse 16, Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need. It might sound a bit different if you have Bibles with

you. But I have always loved that. It's been a helpful reminder to me to be a *practicing* Christian again and trying to renew my acceptance of Christ's grace. Also, it's a very active and simple way of articulating grace in both directions. Grace being something constantly renewed and constantly available to us as a resource. We need to use boldly and also boldly speak and boldly accept. It is obviously a very proactive word. And for me it touches the relationship that Christ after the crucifixion wanted to have with humanity. Whether that makes sense or not, I don't want to add on to the pressure . . .

Marieke: I like what you said.

Tom: (to Katie) I'm really struggling to hear. (to all) I'm really very deaf as well as half blind. I'm sorry.

Karie: He was referring to that bit in Hebrews. I don't know what you missed. Tom is having trouble hearing that.

Fred: I was referring to verse 16, chapter 4, about Christ experiencing human suffering, not human sin but human temptation to sin, and infirmities . Then having said that, Paul goes on to say that , we in or humanity may therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive grace to help in our time of need. And that conversation we had just brought that back into my head.

Leo: It reminds me of what you said in the very beginning about Roman patronage. Not something just top down, like the patrician class looking at people, saying I want you, but also it could be something where the people say, I want to have this and making the request known

Katie: Yes.

Leo. And boldly approach. To boldly approach the people in power and say, this is something that I would like, to boldly approach.

Katie: That's part of the freedom from the law that we experience in grace. That we can climb the mountain. We don't have to wait until Moses comes down.

Tom: Right. And here's a text that follows on very well from what Fred was saying, in the second chapter of Philippians. make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. ³Do nothing from selfish ambition or empty conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. ⁴Let each of you look not to your own interests but to the interests of others. ⁵Let the same mind be in you that was^[a] in Christ Jesus,

⁶who, though he existed in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be grasped,

⁷but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
assuming human likeness.

And being found in appearance as a human,

⁸ he humbled himself

and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.

From verse 6 on, scholars say, this is a quotation from an early Christian hymn, earlier than Paul. So, this is about as close as we get to how the early church had responded to the Jesus event. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who emptied himself to live in solidarity with others, the most rejected, even to the point of his terrible suffering on the cross. He was tempted in every way that we are, but emptied himself of that self-concern, and in that weakness, Paul says in 1 Corinthians, we find our strength; it is that weakness, we live out the life of Christ. We are invited to live out the life of Christ, though tempted in every way as *he* was, but live connected, and therefore not self-centred, but other-centred in a way that feels good, joyful, full of grace and truth.

Katie: Emptying gets back to that funnel idea. Emptying himself, so that the love of the Father could flow through him.

Tom: Absolutely. Absolutely. Does that make sense? I like that comparison.

Fred: Yes, I think it does. . . .

Ken: We can say that Christ, the Christ of Jesus, is a revelation of what God is like. And the cross, as a sacrifice, is a way of being, which is the way God wants us to be.

Katie: (to Tom) Christ is a revelation of God, and the cross is the way God wants us to be. Yeah, that's good that you put the word revelation in there, because it's not just receiving from God, but it is revealing who God is.

Tom: Yes, remember that verse from Galatians I brought up earlier, where Paul speaks about God revealing himself "in me", not just to me but in the transformation of who I am so that who I am is Christ crucified. I have always been fascinated by the Gospel of John that invites the Christian to become the daughter or the sons of God by accepting the way of Jesus as their own, and never resolves the tension between that and the insistence in that same gospel that Jesus is the only son of God. It's like we who believe that Jesus is the only son of God are invited to become daughters and sons of God ourselves. There are paradoxes and tensions in scripture that need to be left unresolved. We are called to become Christ to one another, as Luther said. The tension is unresolved. We worship that which we are called to become. Our worship IS the process of embodying Christ to one another, our worship is to become members of the body of Christ.

Becoming a Christian is always something you are aiming toward. You are always a recovering alcoholic in that sense. It needs to be a process of hope, of the faith that Hebrews says is the assurance of things hoped for.

Fred: If you're a practicing Christian you have to keep practicing.

Katie: We use the word disciple, which is the equivalent to learner.

Tom: It's interesting that we think of discipline as punishment, as something onerous. But if you are practicing as a disciple . . .

Katie: It's your homework.

Tom: . . . yes, you know you have something to learn. Now, what time is it getting to be?

Katie: It's half past eight.

Tom: I think we're ahead of ourselves in terms of having covered what I had hoped to offer . . .

Katie: I just have one more thing. (Whispers to Tom: Bonhoeffer)

Tom: There's this book by a theologian named Dietrich Bonhoeffer called . . .

Katie: The Cost of Discipleship.

Tom: The Cost of Discipleship. It would be important to look at that but I think it would take a whole session. There are a couple of other theologians it would be helpful to look at. One is Jüergen Moltman. I don't know whether he's still alive. He teaches at Tübingen.

Katie: He's still alive.

Tom: And a Catholic existentialist theologian, Karl Rahner. And Dietrich Bonhoeffer, to give us an idea of that is going in a more contemporary context.

Katie: He died in June.

Tom: He died in June.

Katie: Moltman is a fascinating theologian. I met him at a conference a number of years ago.

Tom: I did too!

Katie: . . .and he told this story about being in the Second World War, and he was ridiculously young, maybe 15, and he said it was the best thing that ever happened to him. There were these young German soldiers and they had a decision to make, were they going to throw their lives away? They were all wondering how they were going to survive, and it was right at the end of the war, should they surrender? So that's what he did. He had the courage to surrender, and so he became a prisoner of war and they took him to I think it was Orkney, and he met a chaplain there who gave him a Bible and he said to himself This is what I really want to do with my life, spend it studying this book.

Tom: So, he surrendered to the first Yanks that he met.

Katie: Probably the Brits

Tom: Of course, a Brit. He went to Orkney. He surrenders to the first Allied troops he met. I met him at a conference too. And I was so impressed with myself, for all the important people I met, me, a hick from Greenfield, Indiana. So, I could hardly wait to tell me mother. I said I met Walter Bruggeman there. I thought, I'm famous. I met Walter `Bruggeman. And she said, Oh, yes, he sent me his latest book. I wasn't going to be defeated. So, I said I met Jürgen Moltman. And she said, He's such a nice man. Then I thought. here's one she won't know. And I met Milan Opočenský, I said. She said, Is he still alive? I felt like this high.

I would like to have another couple of sessions in which we explored grace in more contemporary contexts. What we have been looking at tonight is vocabulary, the way the word grace was used in the culture and in the Bible. I hope we have at least touched on issues that are very personal for us, because at the end of the day what we are really talking about is the daily practice of Christian life, what we bring to our prayers. What I would hope to deal with is the theological thinking that belongs to the language of the church as it tries to live as an important and relative institution in the twenty-first century--Bonhoeffer, Moltman and Rahner could be looked at Are you interested in carrying this on in another meeting or two?. OK, fortnightly or monthly?

Katie: I think monthly, because Leo has exams.

Tom: OK, monthly?

Fred: Yes, that would be nice. Thank you.

Tom: So, shall we say the first Thursday in February?

Fred: That's the 6th of February.

Tom: We've recorded this tonight, so that will give others who wanted to be here tonight, like Nickie, for instance, the opportunity to see what we have done. Taiwo is particularly important, because our topic is based on a question about grace he had at the end of our workshop on Christians for Adult Christians. The whole idea of doing this on Zoom as well as a house group came from Cindy, so there may be others who want to join this. OK, anyone want to take things further tonight?

Leo closes the session with prayer.

Next meeting 6 February at 7 pm.