



## Cascading Grace

Many years ago, a young girl attended a service in her beautiful, home church. In the pulpit was a Sister from the Wesley Deaconess College in Ilkley. She was dressed in the uniform of that time, a dark, navy-blue dress with stiff white collar and cuffs. A slim figure, with her greying hair held neatly back, she appeared quite severe. On her head was the brimmed, navy hat all deaconesses were required to wear. This was the only item that gave individuals freedom to express themselves. Some wore it tilted rakishly to one side; others wore it on the top of their head, slightly over their eyes, like a model. Sister Margaret, for that is who it was, was not one for making fashion statements or drawing attention to herself. Her voice was steady and unemotional as she proceeded with her sermon. Suddenly, one sentence leapt out for her eager listener who was contemplating a call to become a Wesley Deaconess. She said, with the slightest suggestion of a smile, “We see students growing in grace during their time in college”. It was that phrase, “growing in grace”, that stuck. What exactly did it mean? It sounded great!

A few years later, she became familiar with one of the theological definitions of grace, “The free, unmerited love of God”. Quite! Interestingly, it still made no sense, and certainly in no way affected her life although it may have helped her to write an assignment and sound reasonably knowledgeable! So the question remained, “What then is grace?”

Then, one evening, she experienced grace – it poured into her life. It was utterly transforming, left no room for doubt that she was forgiven and was accepted as the dearly loved child of the heavenly Father. She could certainly point now to the experience of grace, but as to defining it, that seemed just as impossible. This, in itself, indicates one of the facets of grace. It is not something that we control. Most of us like to think we are in

control over everything that affects us. Even God fits into this mind-set as we attempt to manipulate him in prayer. We cannot control grace, or God. This is a salutary lesson. Grace comes as a pure gift given when He wills it and where He wills it. Grace may transform us in an instant, as with Saul on the Damascus Road, or it may not. It may come to us daily, or there may be times in the wilderness.

It does not depend on our own goodness. Indeed a moral, upright life can often be a barrier to grace because there is no sense of need. I am a good man/woman means nothing in the context of grace. Who are we comparing ourselves with? We may be better than our neighbour but the measurement is against God. All have failed. Yet equally we can't manipulate grace by searching for our failures in order to make God act. Both the despair of failure and saving grace are His gifts.

We may have the most advanced theological education, or indeed knowledge of the Bible, and never know the grace of God. It is a gift of God given to the needy and those who the world despises. It is Christ moving among us, as he did in the Gospels; Jesus who loved sinners and the poor.

Paul Tillich was a theologian and his book of sermons entitled, "The Shaking of the Foundations", was written in the aftermath of the Second World War. He took as his text in one talk, "Where sin increased, grace abounded all the more". (Rom. 5:20 RSV) He did not attempt to define grace but he describes when this gift may strike us.

"Grace strikes us when we are in great pain and restlessness. It strikes us when we walk through the dark valley of a meaningless and empty life. It strikes us when we feel that our separation is deeper than usual because we have violated another life, a life which we loved, or from which we were estranged. It strikes us when our disgust for our own being, our indifference, our weakness, our hostility and our lack of direction and composure have become intolerable to us. It strikes us when year after year, the longed for perfection of life does not appear, when the old compulsions reign within us as they have for decades, when despair destroys all joy and courage. Sometimes at that moment a wave of light breaks into our darkness and it is as though a voice were saying: 'You are accepted' ".

All we have to do is to accept that we are accepted by God.