

# Grace

Dinah Livingstone thinks about grace.

Paul's key argument in his Letter to the Romans is:

'Now irrespective of the Law, God's righteousness ... comes to all who believe through faith in Jesus Christ. There is no distinction, for all have sinned and fallen short of God's glory and all are freely justified by the gift of his grace, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus' (Rom 3:21-24).

Grace is a free gift, not like wages that are due, but a gratuitous extra (Rom 4:4). Other passages in the New Testament stress the generosity of this free gift: 'the overflowing richness of his grace in his kindness towards us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not from yourselves but is the gift of God (Eph 2:7-9).

In Luke's gospel when the angel Gabriel comes to Mary to announce that she will bear a child who will be the Son of the Most High, he salutes her: 'Hail, full of grace!' (Lk 1:28). The Greek word *κεχαριτωμενη* (*kecharitomene*), usually translated 'full of grace', is a verb in the perfect passive, literally meaning 'you who have been graced' or favoured – been given a great gift. Then the angel says: 'Don't be afraid, Mary, for you have found grace with God...' Later defined as *θεοτοκος*: *theotokos* (god-bearer/mother of God), Mary will bear and give birth to this gift of God himself to humanity. Then in the Prologue poem to John's gospel, when the divine Word becomes flesh and lives among us, 'we saw his glory... full of grace and truth' (Jn 1:14).

Over the centuries there have been fierce arguments about what grace means and how it operates. Three major contenders have been Augustine (in his dispute with the Briton Pelagius), the medieval scholastic Thomas Aquinas and Martin Luther at the Reformation. Aquinas and Luther disagree sharply about how grace works. For Aquinas, 'grace does not destroy nature but perfects it' (*Summa* I: 1.8). He sees grace as perfecting nature, helping it to become fully itself. But Luther writes in his

*Explanations of the 95 Theses*: 'This is the confidence that Christians have and our real joy of conscience, that by faith our sins become no longer ours but Christ's, upon whom God placed the sins of all of us. All the righteousness of Christ becomes ours... He spreads his cloak and covers us.' For Luther, 'putting on Christ' is like a putting on a cloak covering what still remains unchanged underneath it. It is almost like an insurance cover. For Luther, grace does not heighten or heal human nature; instead, grace gives us Christ's righteousness by faith. Aquinas's view of human nature is much more positive.

However, although Aquinas and Luther disagree about how grace works when we have received it, both agree that grace is first given by God as a free gift. But if we can no longer accept a supernatural realm with supernatural beings who really act upon us, what can we make of grace? Is there natural grace? Indeed, we do see grace in many areas of life and below I give examples in three areas: sport, poetry and kindness. Here Aquinas' theology, that 'grace does not destroy nature but perfects it', is much more fruitful and appropriate than Luther's. Grace is a gift, an extra, 'over and above'; it is common humanity *plus*, or we could call it *fullness*.

The runner Mo Farah can run very fast. It is a gift. But as well as having an inborn ability, he has had to train very strenuously to achieve the victories in races he has won. Running comes naturally to human beings, but Mo's gift is to run faster, 'over and above' the common pace. It does not destroy nature but perfects it. Besides that, when he is running he is very graceful. Anyone can sit on a horse and bump along but a good rider is also graceful. According to a paper published in the journal *Social Anthropology* (29.08.2013), horses and their human riders can develop such a close connection that the two go into a state of co-being. This state feels like a gift but comes from practice and developing a relationship, so that horse and rider become one. We could call this physical grace, and I have

noticed that a standing group of building workers is usually more graceful than a standing group of dons.

Poetry is also a gift – a grace – something over and above the common. But it will not be good poetry if it is not rooted in ordinary language. In his *Preface to the Lyrical Ballads* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition 1805), Wordsworth inveighs against the use of ‘poetic diction’. He wants poetry that ‘describes [things] in a selection of language really used by men; and at the same time to throw over them a certain colouring of imagination...’ Towards the end of the nineteenth century, Hopkins writes, in a letter to Robert Bridges (14.08.1879):

‘I cut myself off from the use of *ere, o’er, wellnigh, what time, say not*, (for do not say), because, though dignified, they neither belong to nor ever could arise from, or be the elevation of, ordinary modern speech. For it seems to me that the poetical language of an age should be the *current language heightened...*’

Thus with poetry too, ‘grace does not destroy nature but perfects it.’ It *heightens* ordinary language. A poem is a highly concentrated body of words that can convey more and have a greater impact than ordinary language. We could compare it to the Word in John’s Prologue quoted earlier. When the divine Word is embodied, then ‘we saw his glory, full of grace and truth’. Later in the Prologue we have: ‘From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. The Law was given by Moses but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.’ The Word becoming embodied – wholly human – brings something *extra*, over and above the language of ‘accounting’; it brings grace. Paul goes to great lengths to say that the Law cannot save us, we need grace.

That can be taken as an argument against the fundamentalist secular humanist, who may distrust and even loathe poetry, insisting that *science* is all we need. But in order to achieve their potential, human beings need ‘fullness’,



*The Genius of Shakespeare: Fiery Pegasus* by William Blake (1809).  
British Museum, London

‘grace upon grace’. The ordinary becomes extraordinary. Of course, it has to be a good poem. A poem may begin with an inspiration but when the poem is actually written it becomes a body of words. If it hits home, for both writer and listener it may bring a moment of illumination, enthusiasm that feels divine.

This can happen especially with spoken poetry. Hopkins says of poetry: ‘till it is spoken it is not performed, it does not perform, it is not itself’. Lorca, in his lecture on the *duende*, which he calls ‘that mysterious power that everyone feels but no philosopher has explained,’ says this power is most likely to appear in the arts that have a living body as interpreter (such as singing, dancing and spoken poetry) – they are incarnate, with poetry, specifically, being incarnate *word*. Lorca adds that in Arabic performances ‘the appearance of the *duende* is greeted with vociferous shouts of ‘*Álál! Alá!*’ (God! God!) – which are not far from the *olé* of bullfighting.



And in the singing of Southern Spain, the presence of the *duende* is followed by shouts of ‘*Viva Dios!*’ (Long live God!). It is a moment of grace, above the ordinary, that feels divine.

Grace is a gift; it is about generosity and, as well as in the human body and human language, it appears above all in human kindness. Kindness is about relationships. There are many moments of grace in falling in love, making love, all kinds of love and friendship. There can also be moments of grace between neighbours and in community – the immediate neighbourhood and out to the wider world. ‘Who is my neighbour?’

Personification is a poetic trope. The scope of human poetic vision or imagination extends to everything on Earth and also creates a whole supernatural realm, in which God/s may personify real powers in the cosmos or (maybe latent) in ourselves. John’s First Letter (1Jn 4: 16) says ‘God is Love’ – perfect love. This love becomes an ideal to which we can aspire, which ‘God’ personifies as a leading idea/ideal or guiding light. Those moments of grace when we apprehend the divine are a glimpse of human possibility. They are poetic visions of fullness, grace upon grace. The blessing at the end of the Second Letter to the Corinthians is ‘May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship (κοινωνία: *koinonia*: communion/ community) of the Holy Spirit be with you all’ (2 Cor 13:13).

Grace appears in large poetic visions of love and fellowship and in attempts to put these into practice. Jesus had a poetic vision of a ‘reign of God’ coming on Earth, in which the hungry will be satisfied and those who weep now will laugh. Paul had a poetic vision of a new humanity ‘in Christ’ as one body all sharing the same bread, where everyone is of equal moral worth and everyone counts. The supernatural intervention they expected did not occur but the vision remains. The Acts of the Apostles describes the first Christian community:

All who believed were together and had all things in common... Day by day ... they broke bread in their houses and shared their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill (χάρις: *charis*: grace) of all the people (Acts 2: 44-47).

Attempts to put such visions into practice also occurred in various revolutions. In the English Revolution of 1649, the Diggers’ leader Gerrard Winstanley said their purpose in digging up and planting land on St George’s Hill was to ‘lay the foundation of making the Earth a Common Treasury for all, both Rich and Poor.’\* The vision and the ensuing action were a moment of grace. 150 years later, London poet William Blake was firmly rooted in this English radical tradition but in the short lyric within his long poem *Jerusalem*, his theology is very Thomist: ‘Grace does not destroy nature but perfects it.’ Blake’s poem picks up on the vision in the Book of Revelation of the beautiful city of kindness coming down to Earth. And for him she is a transformed London. He lists the familiar names of London districts to stress that the reign of kindness, the new Jerusalem, can only be realised here on Earth or nowhere: ‘Making all things new’ does not mean a *replacement* of the old but a renewal, a transformation:

The fields from Islington to Marybone,  
To Primrose Hill and Saint John’s Wood,  
Were builded over with pillars of gold  
And *there* Jerusalem’s pillars stood...  
Pancras and Kentish Town repose...

Echoing both the Letter to the Colossians (3:9-10) and Che Guevara, Ernesto Cardenal and the Nicaraguan Revolution of 1979 urgently promoted ‘*el hombre nuevo*’, a generous new humanity willing to share. With its strong input

of liberation theology, the Nicaraguan Revolution became the ‘threat of a good example’ to a hostile USA. It strove to create a fairer society, among other things, by distributing land and housing, setting up health-posts (eliminating polio) and attempting to educate the population, not only through a prize-winning literacy campaign and new schools, but by setting up poetry workshops all over the country. Although these attempts to put a vision of generosity into practice may not last and may be flawed in other ways, they are moments of grace.

Earlier this year people rejoiced when, with tremendous generosity and risk, divers from many countries co-operated in the difficult and very dangerous rescue of the twelve boys of the Thai Wild Boars football team and their coach, who were trapped in a cave deep underground. A common reaction was: ‘Why can’t we always be like that?’ Why can’t we all work together to solve the world’s problems? The rescue was a moment of grace which was profoundly moving.

Paul and later theologians see humanity as *fallen* in Adam and needing supernatural grace to be redeemed or ransomed. It is impossible to take literally this story of the fall of humanity into ‘original sin’ through Adam and Eve’s disobedience in eating the forbidden fruit. That part of the Christian tradition must be rejected as untenable. However, perhaps we could translate the idea of a ‘fall’ as *shortfall*. In the myth, Eve and Adam ate from the tree of knowledge. It is *because* we have knowledge and imagination, with poetic visions of human possibilities as ‘the human form divine’ (in power, word and spirit – a trinity, personified in the three persons of the divine Trinity), we have a sense of *shortfall* when, again and again, we fail to achieve what we have envisioned. As in the passage from Paul’s Letter to the Romans with which this article began, we *fall short* of God’s glory – the ideal.

Christian theology has seen an opposition between the supernatural and fallen human nature (‘spirit’ and ‘flesh’). Paul says: ‘If you live according to the flesh you are destined to die; but if by the spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live’ (Rom 8:13). Paul compares Christian life to running a race. He actually seems to admire athletes who train hard to achieve their goal but, he says, the ‘Christian race’ leads to a

better reward: ‘Athletes exercise self-control in all things; they do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable one’ (1 Cor 9: 25). But we *are* perishable, so why not rejoice in natural grace wherever it occurs?

The greatest of all is love. A shortfall in love or kindness (both personal and political) matters most. Just because we fail to get there and may feel we cannot do so without supernatural aid, that does not mean that there *is* any supernatural aid available. I don’t think there is. There remains natural grace, intermittent and perishable as it may be. The Greek word for grace *χάρις* (*charis*) is related to the word *χάρα* (*chara*), which means ‘joy’. Grace does not destroy nature but perfects it and is a powerful incentive not to give up. When it comes, it feels like a gift and is a joy.

\* Gerrard Winstanley, ‘A Declaration to the Powers of England...’, *Selected Writings*, ed. Andrew Hopton (Aporia Press, London 1989), p.15.

## Performance

‘The horse and the rider are one,’  
said the flat-capped countryman  
who stood by the unpainted rail  
of the jumping enclosure.

Lines in parallel  
boy’s back and horse’s  
as they rose in a perfect arc  
to the triple bars.

That achieved perfection  
celebrates itself  
and is a moment’s celebration  
in the watcher’s eye:

We are borne up in communion  
by a horse, by a song.

Kathleen McPhilemy

This poem is published in *Witness to Magic* (Hearing Eye, London 1996) and is reprinted by kind permission of the author and publisher. Kathleen McPhilemy’s other poetry collections include *A Tented Peace* (1995) and *The Lion in the Forest* (2004), both from Katabasis.