

Rooted in Grace¹

I want to begin today's homily by with a contrasting of a religion of Karma with a religion of Grace. The first is the central tenet of the eastern religions, most especially Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism, and Taoism. The second is the central tenet of the Abrahamic religions of Judaism and Christianity.

The religion of Karma and the religion of Grace.

The first one has a lot to recommend it which explains its endurance across the centuries. A Karma approach says that by a cosmic spiritual law we are punished or awarded according to our moral activity. Therefore good intent and good deeds contribute to good karma and future happiness, while bad intent and bad deeds contribute to bad karma and future suffering. This suffering will happen in this life or a life to come and similarly we will be rewarded, either in this life or the life to come. Karma might not be immediate as is the law of gravity. It might be delayed but nevertheless it will come in the long run and people are rewarded or punished according to their merit. This in a way satisfies our sense of fairness and justice. That is why it is popular.

A religion of Karma focuses on our work. What about a religion of Grace? Grace means "gift" and repeatedly in the Bible it is associated with the theological virtue of faith.

Let me quote two verses from Paul. The first is Ephesians 2:8:

For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God

What saves us is not Karma but the Grace of God, which we appropriate by faith. Paul could not be clearer, this is not of our own doing; rather it is the gift of God. A religion of Karma places the primary emphasis on the human act. A religion of grace places the primary emphasis on the divine act.

Now with this in mind listen to the last verse we had from our Romans reading for today.

For God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all.

I want to point out that this comes in the 11th chapter of Romans. Paul has been developing the argument of this letter, which really studies in depth what Paul says in Ephesians about the grace of God. Paul shows that God in Jesus Christ embodies grace's fullness. The first part of

¹ I am grateful to Bishop Robert Barron who uses this comparison in his homily for the 20th Sunday of Ordinary Time. He then develops the theme with a different focus from mine. If you would like to hear his teaching, please go to: <https://www.wordonfire.org/resources/homily/a-religion-of-grace/5561/>.

Romans concludes in chapter 11 where Paul states that whether of Jewish or Gentile ancestry, if based on a legalistic evaluation, we all have bad Karma. This vivid picture of imprisonment is to convey to us that apart from God's initiative we will not be freed. But says Paul, God desires to be merciful to all and in the penultimate verses from today's reading he speaks about God's mercy for the Jew and Gentile alike.

Just as you were once disobedient to God but have now received mercy because of their disobedience, 31 so they have now been disobedient in order that, by the mercy shown to you, they too may now receive mercy.

Paul understands that salvation, which is the restoration of God's original intention for us, which is to live as his image bearers, can only happen when, by faith, we respond to the Grace of God. This close association between grace and faith is articulated at the outset of Romans. Listen to these words from chapter 1. They are the theme of the whole letter, Romans 1:16-17. Listen especially the repeated use of the word "faith".

16 For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. 17 For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, "The one who is righteous will live by faith.

Four times in two verses the virtue of faith is mentioned. The power of the Gospel is appropriated by those who have faith. And just as he mentions in chapter 11, so too here in chapter 1. It is for the Jew and the Greek (meaning Gentile) alike.

So what does Paul mean when he says that the righteousness of God is revealed through faith? This means that apart from God's act of revealing His grace to us through the biblical witness we would not discern it on our own. From a human perspective a religion of Karma is more obvious and appeals to our common sense. Yet says Paul, through the faith of the writers of the Hebrew Bible we have presented to us the Grace of God, who in Jesus Christ embodies the fullness of grace's manifestation. Those who then receive this revelation, live by faith in the Grace of God. Notice how Paul puts it.

"The one who is righteous will live by faith"

In other words to live an upright moral life is not something we are capable of achieving on our own. However it is as we live by faith, rooted in Grace, where we depend on the mercy of God, that we in turn can live upright lives. It is worth noting that Romans 1-11 centres of the Religion of Grace and chapters 12-15 focus on the kind of life grace enables us to live. What Paul does in 15 chapters in Romans, he summarizes in three verses in Ephesians:

For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—9 not the result of works, so that no one may boast. 10 For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

Are we to exhibit good works? For sure, but these works are the fruit of a life lived in Grace.

Think of it this way. Faith is like the roots of a raspberry bush. Without the roots, there would be not bush. But because of the deep roots, the stem can grow and the fruit mature. The good works of the Christian life are the fruit that grows from a life lived deeply rooted in the faith of grace. Knowing the mercy of God brings about a conversion of heart whereby we can live a life of good works, which is God's will for us.

When we think of faith there are two dimensions to this virtue that we need to consider. First there is the act of faith. This is our disposition that allows us to respond to the object of faith, the Grace of God with trusting confidence.

It is this two fold character of faith that we see on display in today's Gospel. This woman, a Gentile, approaches Jesus with a sincere request concerning her daughter. At first Jesus seems dismissive of her and then even insulting.

"I was sent only to the Lost Sheep of the House of Israel."

She however is persistent.

"Lord, help me"

Jesus at first is suggesting that it is for Israel that he is to display how fully embodies the Grace anticipated in the Old Testament. But the woman will not let it go. In response to her appeal, the Lord's words seem callous:

"It's not fair to take the children's food and give it to the dogs"

To which she responds:

"Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the master's table"

Jesus is insisting in the most Jewish of the four Gospels, Matthew, that the food of grace was intended first and foremost for the Jewish people. Why is this? Because the Jewish people were the ones to whom the religion of grace was initially revealed. Dogs was a term the Jewish people used to speak about the Gentiles.

But listen to the woman's response. She is saying in effect, but Lord there is enough grace to go around. Even the crumbs that fall from the table will suffice. To which Jesus says:

"Woman great is your faith. Let it be done for you as you wish"

Her act of faith was a great expression of the religion of grace. She knew that what she most needed was Jesus' initiative in her life and that of her daughter's. This would make all the difference.

In our Collect today, we prayed:

O God, who have prepared for those who love you good things which no eye can see, fill our hearts we pray with the warmth of your love, so that loving you in all things and above all things we may obtain your promises.”

Hearts filled with the warmth of God’s love are lives rooted in Grace. It is faith knowing God’s mercy that sees in every work we do the fruitful manifestation of grace.

May we be inspired to live more intentionally the religion of Grace and with the woman cry out: “Lord help me”, and in turn hear the Lord’s commendation:

“Great is your faith. Let it be done for you as you wish”.