

# Christmas – God's grace as seen through Jesus

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Christmas 2022 – Grace

Intro: A priest is being chased through the woods by a hungry bear. As he runs, the priest cries out: Oh please God, make this bear a good Christian! Suddenly, he trips and sprawls on the ground. The bear catches up, stops, kneels, puts its paws together, and says: "Lord, thank you for this meal that I am about to receive. Amen"

One way lots of people express their faith each day is by saying grace before eating – giving thanks to God for graciously providing our food and drink. But that's a limited way to think about that word 'grace'. There's much more to it! The invitation to communion today calls Jesus 'the grace of God' and our epistle reading says we have been justified by the grace of Christ our saviour.

So the grace prayer we say giving thanks for the life-sustaining food we receive is a small step towards Christmas where we celebrate the astounding grace of God who comes to us as a baby: as one of us! We Christians believe Jesus was – and still is – God with us.

Why do we need God with us? Because we people hurt; we need help; God's help; God's grace. There's an epidemic of loneliness among young people; persistent epidemics of violence against first nations' people, against women and children and against our fellow creatures. We're right to fear for the survival of life on Earth. We have great needs. We hurt on a world scale – the desperate needs of more than 100 million displaced people; the armed aggression causing so much misery; people caught in floods here and overseas, and so many

other disasters – a relentless cycle of suffering. And often, we just look for someone to blame. That won't help.

Indeed, Centre for Public Christianity senior research fellow Natasha Moore writes that Christmas is ... the opposite of the question Santa Claus asks – 'have you been naughty or nice?'.

Humans have rejected God but instead of rejecting humans, God goes so far as to become... a baby, to suffer human frailties and indignities, and to dignify and restore the relationship: God's the one who breaks the cycle. Christmas 2022: Santa Claus' gift he can't keep from us (theage.com.au)

There are huge needs we can't deal with. Only with God's help can we bring healing; that's why we need God with us. And he has come. The Christ child, Jesus (God saves) coming to save us is the grace who can break the cycle of suffering.

That's grace for you: not judgement, but grace; God doing what it takes to bring healing and hope. There's judgement a-plenty to be had in the tabloids and online. But that helps no-one; it only compounds people's suffering. We need the grace of God; grace which brings forgiveness and healing love. That can break the cycle.

Our Bible study group discussed the word grace last Tuesday. One group-member found a definition of grace which perfectly describes what happened when God came as the baby of Bethlehem. It goes something like this.

Grace is the generous action of God stooping / bending down to us in kindness to reach us in our need, and to bless us. Hebrew Roots/The original foundation/Grace – Wikibooks, open books for an open world

That's what happened at Bethlehem; God bent down to us in kindness from being transcendent divinity to becoming a vulnerable baby. That's what we needed God to do: to be with us; one of us. And God did it. That's grace.

Quoting again, Some people call God's grace 'unmerited

favour'. But grace is more than just favour or mercy. God's mercy expresses compassion with us, but God's grace is generous kindness enacted. [God acts and] grace releases God's enabling power into our lives. Again, the baby born in Bethlehem – God as one of us is exactly that; God's enabling power released into our lives. The life example Jesus gave us – from his birth in Bethlehem through to his death and resurrection – was all focussed on offering and equipping us with healing grace.

In the Christmas story, we've just read how grace challenged social stratification. Christ came first to farm animals. The first people invited to meet Jesus were from the bottom of society; shepherds, who were usually children – the ones who seldom feature in great histories. God stooping down in kindness to reach us in our need – coming to the least first. It's the opposite of how most societies do things. Jesus spent his ministry with the people left behind by his society. God stooping down in kindness to reach us in our need.

The baby of Bethlehem would grow up teaching us how to live – being neighbour to outsiders, healing the sick, restoring outcasts to community, and building a community of people equipped to reach out with healing grace to a world of people locked out.

That healing community is us. Who can you think of who needs this grace? And are you and I equipped to offer it? Do we know how Jesus helps, includes and heals? Are we familiar with the way he does things? Because you and I are his hands and feet now; instruments of his healing grace. How would Jesus look after the one you'd like to receive his help? Can you and I help and heal the way he would? This is why we study his actions and words week by week; that as his body, we might ourselves embody God's grace in the way we've seen Jesus do it. He showed us what to do, and he told us to go and do likewise. Are we doing that?

The Christ child, Jesus coming to save us, is God's generous kindness in action; stooping down to us in kindness to reach us in our need and to bless us. We're called to pass on that blessing. As we say grace before eating, and it reminds us that God is looking after our needs, can it remind us that God wants everyone's needs met; their wounds healed. Jesus shows us how to be instruments of God's grace, committed to peace on Earth, healing divisions, freeing captives. Let's recommit our own lives to the Christ-child's vocation for us; bearers of his inclusive, loving blessing of grace. Amen.