

Sermon Trinity 16 (25th in ordinary year A)

Isaiah 55:6-9, Philippians 1:20-21,24 , Matthew 20:1-16.

Generosity and grudge part two

Our readings last Sunday challenged us to imitate our heavenly Father by forgiving others as he forgives us. You will remember that I reflected how the parable of the wicked servant was sometimes repackaged for today's sensibilities as the parable of the generous king. Today readings highlight some similar themes and we have one of my very favourite parables. As I have said to you before I have in years past got children to act it out and the cries of "its just not fair" have almost led to blows. I love the parable as showing the generosity of God but like most I'm glad that our world is not ordered like it. Having said that some might make out a good case that it is by highlighting our appalling productivity with some folk working their fingers to the bone whilst others end up with the same doing diddley squat. This parable is not intended to praise indolence and handouts for doing nothing. The parable of talents firmly knocks that shameful social-economic out of bounds.

However we are reminded that the ways of God are not our ways. The readings challenge us not to resent God's generosity but rather reflect it in our relations with one another. The prophet Isaiah reminds us that God does not think or act the way we do 'The heavens are as high above earth as my ways are above your ways, my thoughts above your thoughts' (Is 55: 9). Just how different God's thoughts and ways are to ours is writ large parable of the labourers in the vineyard - today's gospel.

The first thing we should note is that it is the owner himself who goes out in search of workers for his vineyard. This was not the normal practice for an employer in Jesus' day nor would it be normal today for Lord Sugar to rove around the streets looking for workers. In Jesus's day as now he would send his foreman, or one of his employees, to the marketplace to pick them up. This Vineyard Owner however, goes to the marketplace himself. Not only that he keeps going at different hours of the day, in search of workers to bring in the harvest. It is clear he's not only concerned about his business but the idleness and predicament of those who have been standing around all day in hope of finding someone to hire them. Note: they want to work.

Of course the second significant element in the parable concerns the wages the workers receive at close of play. Starting with those who were employed last, standard procedure in Jesus' time, the last to be employed receive their wages first. They receive a full day's wage. The same as those who have worked all through the day. No union differentials here – there would no doubt be a strike today. And yes its just not fair. It isn't difficult We easily identify with the complaints of those workers who, having laboured throughout the heat of the day, expected to receive more money than those who had worked for just one hour. And yet, they have, as the parable makes clear, no justifiable grounds for their complaint. They received a just wage: the salary their employer had agreed with them.

The main point of the parable, the sting in the tail – the last words of the Vineyard Owner: 'Why be envious because I am generous' (Mt 20:16). These words wake us up to what the parable is all about. It is not about work and wages, about industrial relations or social justice. It is about God's magnanimity of heart, his extravagant generosity, especially to the late-comers, those overlooked, left behind, or pushed to the margins of society. Should somebody baptised or confirmed at 80 be less valued in the church than one who has been a member all their life or the newcomer less important than others?

God's ways, do not contradict demands of social justice but they do transcend them. God acts in the way of gratuitous love, rather than entitlement. We especially know all about the society of entitlement do we not and how its needs to get back in touch with grace. For me it is the greatest logic for the type of monarchy we are blessed with in our land – a reminder that what we have is ultimately not our entitlement for our own efforts but gift.

Only in the light of understanding such grace can we understand the foolish generosity of the vineyard owner, or for example the lavish welcome of the Father in the parable of the prodigal son for his wayward son. Only in the same light can we appreciate the extraordinary behaviour of Jesus in mixing with tax-collectors and sinners and yes his welcome and open love for us too.

God doesn't make contracts with us, as if we could bargain or negotiate for a better deal. However he does invite us into covenant – the new covenant in Christ. God through the cross promises us everything and asks of us no less. In keeping his promise God doesn't reward us for effort but offers what is his nature over-flowing generosity. God does not treat us according to our deserts, but according to his boundless generosity, mercy and compassion.

Of course there are **so whats**. Firstly, remember the workers are willing and don't wish to be idle. Secondly we are challenged to imitate God's ways of thinking and acting in our relationships with others; less focusing on our entitlements or counting our deserts, turning from the narrow world of human calculation, of competition and rewards. We are challenged to embrace the ways of God where nothing is really earned and everything is gift. We do well not to begrudge God's generosity; after all we are recipients and are reminded of this each time we hold out our hands to receive our Lord in bread and wine.

The Revd Fr. David Wylie RN

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