

Divine justice

A sermon preached by Dr Tony Lemon on Sunday 24 September 2017 in St Peter's at 10.00am.

Refs: Matthew:20, 1-16 (the parable of the labourers in the vineyard). Also Jonah 3:10 - 4:11 & Philippians 1:21-30.

A common theme running through today's readings is divine justice. In Jonah's case, his anger against God is at first puzzling: Jonah's own warning to the sinning people of Nineveh has been dramatically successful, probably surprising Jonah himself. But instead of rejoicing in this, and accepting God's subsequent compassion, Jonah is angry because he still thinks that Nineveh should face severe punishment. So, like Jeremiah, he starts to argue with God about what is just. In his letter to the Philippians, Paul emphasises that Christian witness brings struggle and suffering, such as he himself had and is still experiencing: Paul speaks of the 'privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well.'

In our Gospel reading, the treatment of those labourers in the vineyard looks at first sight like a most inept piece of industrial relations, and the vineyard owner's actions hard to justify. He went out at sunrise, 6:00am, the beginning of the working day, and hired workmen, agreeing to pay them the usual day's wages. Then on four subsequent occasions, spaced throughout the day, he went out and hired more men who were standing idle in the market-place, the last hired at 5.00pm, just an hour before sunset and the end of that long working day. Yet when the time came to pay them, the vineyard owner ordered that they all be paid the full day's wage starting with those who had worked for only one hour. As they witnessed this evidence of the owner's largesse and his prosperity, not surprisingly those who had, as they put it, 'sweated the whole day long in the blazing sun', expected at least a bonus payment, but they received only what had been agreed in the morning.

We can sympathise with them. Wouldn't we have felt the same? It looks like an incompetent piece of personnel management. But this is not the point of the parable. The situation it describes certainly provides food for thought about labour and wider social issues today. But let's leave those aside for the moment and consider the parable in its particular context. Look at the words which introduce it. Jesus does not say 'Handle your labour relations like this', but something quite different: 'The kingdom of heaven is like this'. In other words, this is how God deals with us: divine justice is different from human justice. This parable is like that of the Prodigal Son in that God's grace shown to the undeserving offends those who consider themselves to be more deserving, as in human terms they are.

In the previous chapter of Matthew's Gospel, Peter has just asked Jesus a very human question. In effect he says, 'Look, we've given up everything for you, what's in it for us?' Quite a lot, it seems. The Twelve will sit on twelve thrones and judge the twelve tribes of Israel. But rewards will not be limited to the Twelve. All who have made sacrifices for Jesus' sake will be repaid many time over, and gain eternal life. Most importantly, 'many who are first will be last, and the last first'. Jesus does not diminish rewards for the disciples, but extends them to all deserving people. Not quite what Peter and the disciples expected to hear. The parable of the labourers in the vineyard is Jesus' attempt to make them understand the true nature of discipleship. It is as if Jesus had said: 'You have received the great privilege of coming into the Christian church and its fellowship right at the beginning. As time goes on, others will join you. You must not claim a special honour and a special place because you were Christians before they were. All people, no matter when they come, are equally precious to God'.

The lesson here is not limited to the Kingdom of Heaven. For us as Christian congregations, it reminds us that we can claim no privileges because we have been members for a long time. We must never think the church belongs to us, and we must welcome and be open to the ideas and approaches of a new generation of members. In secular organisations too, how much damage is done by consciousness of seniority? insistence on privilege, ignoring good ideas and sound advice because it comes from the wrong place. This is not the Christian way.

For the Jews in Jesus' day the parable had a clear message concerning their spiritual and ethnic pride. The Jews knew they were a chosen people and looked down on Gentiles. This attitude threatened to be carried forward into the Christian church. But Jesus makes it clear that in God's economy there is no 'most favoured nation' clause, and no master race. There is also a warning in the parable for the Pharisees – the men who went to extremes in their efforts to fulfil the demands of God's law. They were the men who, in spiritual terms, 'laboured the whole day long in the blazing sun'. In terms of natural justice, we can understand their resentment that this new teacher, Jesus, was spending time with sinners, people who had shown little concern for the law or religion. Worse still, Jesus went on to say that these people would actually take precedence in the Kingdom of Heaven. How could that be right?

They had a point, of course. The sinners didn't deserve their place in the Kingdom of Heaven. Where the Pharisees were wrong was in thinking *that they did*. Spiritual pride blinded them to the fact that no-one *deserves* eternal life – none of us achieve what Jesus commands in the Sermon on the Mount – 'Be ye therefore perfect, as your Father in Heaven is perfect.' But with all our imperfections, all of us, no matter how late we come to God, are equally precious in his sight.

So far we have concerned ourselves largely with the lessons originally intended by the parable, and we have seen that they can speak not only to the disciples, to the Jews and the Pharisees, but to us today. The labourers in the vineyard were but a medium for Jesus to portray the way God deals with all his people. But the particular situation he describes is also worth reflection. These men were hired labourers. They were the lowest class of workers, lacking even the relative security of slaves and servants who were at least, to some extent, attached to the families they served. Hired labourers were at the mercy of chance employment. Their wage, when they earned it, was little more than the minimum to feed them and their families for a day. If they could not get work, hunger was always near. No sickness pay, no paid holidays, no old age pension. It was a precarious and perpetually anxious existence – the ultimate form of human exploitation.

Sadly such lifestyles are by no means a thing of the past. Even in this country, many of us can remember the old system of dock labour in our ports, where crowds of men would try to attract the attention and the favour of the man charged with choosing whom to take on – a practice breeding favouritism and corruption as well as insecurity, anxiety and poverty. Today we have the relatively new phenomenon of zero-hours contracts: they may suit some, as employers are keen to point out, but for a great many they represent insecure dependence. In many parts of the world today, that biblical scene of labourers waiting for hire can still be seen. I have seen just such scenes in South Africa, where millions of people know that they have little hope of secure employment. What misery to wait all day, every day, in the hopes of work and the money to feed your family. Was the vineyard owner not right to see these people as deserving the same reward as those who had laboured all day? Isn't mental anxiety, the hopelessness of waiting for work that may not come, as bad or worse than the hard labour itself?

So the parable reminds us of two great truths: the right of everyone to work, and the right of a living wage in return. How tragic that capitalism, undoubtedly the most efficient and productive economic system the world has yet devised, still fails to guarantee those rights, as it suffers from cycles of boom and recession, growth and stagnation, and as it so often takes unfair advantage of the desperation of the poor for work. It must be wrong that so many benefits claimants in Britain are in need of help despite full-time work, and that so many people turn to food banks. It was more than a hundred and fifty years after the beginning of the Industrial Revolution in Britain before our society grasped the need, in common humanity, for a welfare state. Today's unemployment benefit is the more organised equivalent of the generosity of the vineyard owner, and our health, education and social services are all a logical extension of it. They recognise, as God does, the value of all people. In committing ourselves to these things, to the principles of redistribution in society and the support of the least and the poorest, we bring ourselves closer to the compassion and generosity of God's dealings with his people.