

25th Sunday of the Year

Today's gospel reading is an extraordinary one. It is found only in Matthew and it presents us with a parable and a metaphor that goes against all our natural human instincts. It strikes us as grossly unfair and our sympathies are surely with those workers who toiled all day in the heat of the sun and yet received exactly the same wage as those who had worked no more than an hour. Most of us would make the same complaint in that situation.

But then, God's love is never fair. It is profligate. If it doesn't pour itself out on both the deserving and the undeserving, it isn't God's love, but some kind of human projection onto him of what we think his love *should* be – like ours, I guess. But God's love will never be like ours – thank God. Hopefully our sense of unfairness will not follow us, like a shadow in the light of the sun, into the kingdom; for there will be citizens there who have spent a very short time indeed living justly, loving tenderly and walking humbly with their God (Micah 6:8), yet they will be just as full citizens of that kingdom as we are. God delights in being unfair.

This delight is part of the upturning of worldly values that is the yeast in the bread of Jesus' teaching and which finds its fullest expression in the Beatitudes. For the world looks down on those who possess little or nothing, but Jesus says the kingdom of heaven is theirs; the world pities the bereaved, but Jesus calls them blessed; the world spends billions on terrible and terrifying weapons of destruction, but

Jesus cherishes those who work for peace as the children of God; the world prizes power, aggression and competition, but Jesus says that the gentle will inherit the earth. The unfairness of God's love belongs to this radically upturning vision. Its full significance has yet to be realised, for it is not only a vision, it is a portrait of the mysteries of the kingdom, it is a code of moral behaviour and a social charter. Mahatma Gandhi believed that if Christians were to live Christ's teaching, earth would become heaven overnight; unfortunately, his experience taught him that this was very rarely the case. It has always been so; in our age, it was G.K. Chesterton who said:

“The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult; and left untried.”

Jesus did not give an explicit interpretation of his own parable – as he sometimes did – but let it stand as it was, a story about the generosity of the vineyard owner – so there have many and various ways suggested about how to understand it. One commentary that I read online said this –

“Because the people in the story are laborers and managers, some assume it is about work. In that case, it seems to say, “Don't compare your pay to others” or “Don't be dissatisfied if others get paid more or work less than you do in a similar job.” It could be argued that these are good practices for workers. If you earn a decent wage, why make yourself miserable because others have it even better? But this interpretation of the parable can also be used to justify

unfair or abusive labour practices. Some workers may receive lower wages for unfair reasons, such as race or sex or immigrant status. (...) Moreover, paying people the same regardless of how much work they do is a questionable business practice.”

– most of which doesn't strike me as terribly helpful.

We should perhaps apply the parable inwardly, to our spiritual selves. Doing this, I'd also like to link it to the exhortation St Paul makes at the end of his letter to the Philippians: “Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ.” Much of the time, most of us don't always manage to conduct ourselves in a manner worthy of Christ's gospel; we live with the same old faults and failings which beset ninety-nine percent of humanity but which ninety-five percent don't care about anyway: gossip and greed, lies and laziness, prejudice and pride – all the old tricks of the ego to maintain the security of its own little kingdom. The ego is everything that is ‘I, me,’ and ‘mine’. It is the daily sense of self that I *take* to be me, that I have always *felt* to be me, but actually isn't – at least, not fully: it is the passing flux above the deep, abiding stillness of our being. An ancient Japanese philosopher has said: “Love is happy when it is able to give something. The ego is happy when it is able to take something.” To quote Gandhi again: “When the ego dies, the soul awakes”; Jesus said this two millennia before: “Anyone who would save his life loses it, but anyone who loses his life will save it.”

Following St Paul's advice to conduct ourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ means dying to our ego and living to our soul. It is losing our life to save it. This is not going to happen easily or soon, because it is the ongoing work of a lifetime: it is, in fact – and to return to the parable – working in the Lord's vineyard with the whole of ourselves, offering all that we are to his service. And, applying that parable inwardly, we can perhaps see that some things in us, some aspects of who and what we are, will come to the vineyard only at the eleventh hour. Some nagging, reluctant, resistant part of us that still prefers to criticise and carp, especially about others; or a deeply-rooted negativity that simply can't find anything to be grateful for; or a persistent sexual impulse that we're just unable to overcome; or the inability to judge others with a compassionate eye. Perhaps, while the greater part of us is happy and willing to work in the vineyard of the Lord, this weakness, this flaw or failing just won't follow suit. Maybe we'll have to love with it for most of our life. St Paul says of his particular flaw:

“And in case my revelations should make me seem exalted, I was given a thorn in the flesh, a messenger from Satan to buffet me. I asked the Lord three times to remove it, but he would not, saying: ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my strength is made perfect in weakness.’” (2 Corinthians 12: 7-9).

Whatever that ‘thorn in the flesh’ was, it came to work in the Lord's vineyard at the eleven hour, but no doubt it was

finally transformed and received its full share in the apostle's lasting blessedness. It will be no different for us.

St Augustine cried out in his famous lyrical lament:

“Late have I loved you, Beauty so ancient and so new, late have I loved you!” (*Confessions*, Ch. 27).

But late doesn't matter! – Jesus teaches us this in today's gospel. Late doesn't signify; late is not rejected but accepted; late receives the same loving welcome as early; late is never turned away. It does not matter, therefore, how late some aspects of our whole self give way – finally – to the grace of God. It doesn't matter how long it takes for gossip to become affirmation, or laziness to become commitment, or prejudice to become affection, or lies to be transformed into an authentic love of all that is true. God does not recognise the concept of 'late'. Besides, it is not yet the eleventh hour; personally I believe it may not come in this particular stage of the one Life. Carrying our thorn in the flesh over into the next stage might not matter so much after all, if the eleventh hour is not yet. As Gandalf said to Pippin: “The journey doesn't end here. Death is just another path, one that we all must take.” The journey into the fullness of loving service with the whole of who and what we are, doesn't necessarily end here either.