

25th Sunday Ordinary Time 2017

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Matthew 20.1-16: the workers in the vineyard

Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?' Matthew 20.15

The scales of justice represent a concept common to many cultures. A number of ancient deities associated with justice or fairness are shown in pictures and statues holding weighing scales, indicating the even handedness with which true justice must be practised. In later iconography, the figure of justice comes to be blindfolded, to emphasise impartiality. Equity and balance are key to what we expect when we look for fairness in dealings between human beings, on a micro level among individuals, and on the larger scale of society and civilization.

Divine justice is, thus, rather problematic. Time and again in both the Old and New Testament, we find that which is deserved being overlooked, ignored or cancelled, and those who are undeserving are so very frequently the recipients of grace and love and mercy.

The parable of the workers in the vineyard is probably familiar to most of us. In an agricultural labour economy, power was entirely in the hands of the one doing the hiring. Those looking for wages gather in the market place to be chosen by local landowners or their representatives. A vineyard owner contracts with some workers first thing in the morning, agreeing to pay the going rate for a day's work. As the day goes on, he calls more and more workers into his vineyard, finally finding people who have been standing idle all day and ushering them in for a final hour's exertion. When the reckoning up is done, those whose shift was only one hour long are paid exactly the same as those who have slogged and sweated all day. Naturally enough, the all day workers grumble, having expected, not unreasonably, that they would receive rather more than someone who had only turned up at the last minute.

In scripture, a vineyard is never simply a vineyard. Ever since the prophet Isaiah sang his song of the vineyard eight centuries before Christ, Jews have known that the vineyard is Israel, the

Lord is its owner, and its labourers are the Lord's chosen people. One plain and simple interpretation of our passage is as a warning to those who, regarding themselves as righteous and law abiding, resent the inclusion which Jesus offers to tax collectors and sinners, to the outcasts who, it might be thought, will be excluded from the Kingdom of heaven. Quite the opposite, Jesus is saying. Those who thought themselves first, will end up as last, because they presumed to control and restrict the all-encompassing love of God.

But that local and chronological context in no way exhausts this troubling tale, for it is directed, as all of Jesus' teaching, at all of us. Do you begrudge my generosity, the master asks. The Greek here is literally, is your eye evil, because I am good? Jesus is challenging our envy, and our sense of self entitlement. But more importantly, he is challenging our very way of looking at ourselves, our lives and our experiences, he is challenging what modernity calls our "worldview". In Matthew 6, part of the Sermon on the Mount, we were warned that the eye is the lamp of the body. If our eye is good, our body will be filled with light. But it is not simply that the eye illuminates the body, the eye also illuminates the world. Or it ought to. An eye which looks with envy, however, will distort our perception of the

world and of others, it will not report accurately on the goodness of God's creation in which we find ourselves.

We are asked, of course, to imagine ourselves in the position of those vineyard workers. Had we been there, working all the day only to find ourselves no better off than people who had spent most of the day standing idle, how would we feel? What would be our reaction, to the landowner's generosity? There is a simple choice: would we be happy for our neighbour, who had gained so much more than expected? Or would we be resentful for ourselves, because someone else seemed to have done better than us? Would we, in other words, think first of ourselves or first of our neighbour? If we are honest, we all know the answer to that question.

And so we are forced to confront divine justice as Jesus presents it to us. How is it that we view the world? Do we see it only from the point of view of individual selfishness and gain? Or are we able to see the master's generosity? The problem with our concept of justice is precisely that it is ours. No matter how fair we may think we are being, no matter how perfectly balanced our scales, the fact remains that they are our scales. There is no neutral, perfect court of appeal in the world of human

selfishness. We are determined that the world should conform to our sense of what is right, to the standards we have constructed according to which our own personal gain can always be measured.

Our complaint, made with all the force of the foot stamping child, is that “it’s not fair”. And of course, it isn’t fair. The love of God is not fair, that is the whole point. If it were fair, what chance would we stand? It’s hardly as if we deserve the infinite love and generosity of the creator, given what we tend to do with the blessings and the gifts showered upon us. But God’s love knows no obstruction and no self-obsessed obfuscation. Instead it is poured out upon us and into us regardless of our determination to see only our own private gain.

“As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my thoughts higher than your thoughts, and my ways than your ways.” So wrote the prophet we call Second Isaiah, as we heard in our first reading. What we must do, and what we so woefully fail to do, is rather simple. We must let God be God. We must acknowledge that we are not in charge, that our rules and regulations are not final, that our constructions of good and bad and right and wrong and fair and unfair are all washed away

in the flood which is the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the endless tide of love which deluges arid humanity with life and creativity. If we, with our evil eye, can only conform the world to our prejudices, then we are seeing just a thing of our own making, and not the truth of the created order which belongs only to God.