

25th Sunday Year A

Matthew 20.1-16: the workers in the vineyard

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The curse of the “evil eye” is a superstition which is powerful in many cultures. It tends to be understood as a spell or a hex which affects someone without their knowledge, resulting from a malevolent look or glare cast in their direction by someone who wishes them ill. The idea is that the person receiving the evil look will then suffer misfortune, and will need recourse to some sort of counter spell, charm or talisman which will free them from the evil. Whilst the belief seems to be particularly strong in Islamic societies, it stems from an idea which pre-dates Islam by a long time, and is reflected in the Greek and Jewish cultures which come together in the Christian New Testament. That idea, simply put, is that to have an evil eye is to look with malice or envy on others, and especially upon their success. So it is that the words which complete the parable we heard this morning – Do you begrudge my

generosity? – are literally translated from the Greek text thus: is your eye evil, because I am good?

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 marketplace to be chosen by local landowners or their representatives. A man who owns a vineyard contracts with some workers first thing in the morning, agreeing to pay them 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.

Now there are several general points to be made about the context of this parable. The first is to remind ourselves that 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: is your eye evil, because I am good. Jesus is challenging our envy, and our sense of self entitlement. But much more, he is challenging everything we think we know, because 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 that simple point takes us a step further. If our eye is evil, if we look at the world only from the point of view of individual selfishness and gain, we are inhibiting our own ability to see the master's generosity, to appreciate, in other words, the excess which is the love of God. We are determined, with our evil eye, 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. We are crying, with all the force of the foot stamping child, 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.

Needless to say, God's own perspective is beyond us. Our finitude contains us just as much as our particularity. Our eye is the eye of envy in part because of our shared humanity. The irony should not be lost on us. We share with others the limits of being individuals. But there was, and is, a human eye which lacks any darkness, a perspective, a worldview, which teaches us what it truly means to illuminate the world with our vision and to rejoice at the joy of others. It is, of course, the eye of God himself, incarnate in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. In the words and the actions of Jesus Christ, there is a world seen from God's perspective. Our task is to pay attention.