11th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Matthew 9.36-10.9

You received without paying; give without pay.

—Matthew 10.8

There are over a dozen clergy on our rota, who worked very hard to keep Masses going during the vacancy, and continue even now. The serving team is over a dozen strong. We have over 20 people who volunteer as readers, intercessors, and sidespeople. 10 people take turns preparing and serving refreshments after Mass. A handful of church watchers come in throughout the week, which allows us to keep the doors open. There are 17 members of the PCC. And then there are the sacristans and flower team, and those who come when we organise big clean-ups of the church. And, of course, many of these are the same people, who do multiple things here. None of them get paid.

And so it is elsewhere too. The volunteering sector is worth £25 billion a year in this country. Unpaid household services—including child- and adult care, and household chores—is worth £1.7 *trillion*, which is larger than the value of the entire paid workforce, and accounts for over 60% of GDP; except

that it isn't included in calculations of GDP at all. It is the dark matter of economics, and an indictment of it. If it weren't for people doing things without pay, the modern economy would collapse.

This injunction to the apostles to "give without pay" is therefore, perhaps, less radical than it might seem.

+++

Nor is it an unambiguous criticism of the notion of remuneration for services rendered: in the very next sentence, Jesus declares that "the labourer deserves his food". But this seems to raise a contradiction. On one hand, the disciples are to "give without pay"; and on the other, they "deserve [their] food".

There are several obvious ways to resolve the contradiction. One is to distinguish between the thing given—the service rendered, if you like—and the people who render said service. The services—the work of healing, exorcising, and preaching—are not to be commodified, and packaged and sold for profit. But service providers nevertheless deserve to be fed.

Another, closely related, option is to distinguish between two target audiences. The disciples—sent out to bring healing of body and soul to all who need it—

ought not demand payment. But the beneficiaries of this ministry should value it enough to contribute materially to it.

That there is a contradiction to resolve at all must be puzzling from a neoliberal mindset. Clearly, the practical solution that gets us all out of this mess is to slap prices on everything. Everyone should demand payment; unpaid labour should be abolished entirely. And if we—as a society and as citizens; as a church and as individual Christians—refuse to pay, then we mustn't want enough what is on offer. And if so, then perhaps it doesn't deserve to exist, or perhaps we don't deserve to have them, or both. There is, on this view, no question that the labourers deserve their wages; the question is whether the rest of us deserve the fruits of their labour.

+++

Among theories of justice, the ancient idea that justice is desert—is giving people their due—is now unfashionable among political philosophers, on the grounds that assessments of worthiness are either impossible, or they perpetuate and propagate inequality.

Their point is easily seen, not least in the populist rhetoric around the deserving or underserving poor, the worthy or unworthy immigrant, which commodifies and quantifies not only labour but people themselves. But perhaps it is not the notion of desert or worthiness itself that is the problem, but the economic logic according to which our assessments of desert and worthiness are habitually made.

You received without paying; give without pay. And, *The labourer deserves his food*. Here then is a theory about what we owe each other, or at least the beginnings of one; a theology of desert, or at least the beginnings of one. We owe each other at least the fulfilment of our basic physical needs: *the labourer deserves his food*. We owe each other also health and hospitality. Recall what the disciples are sent out to freely give: *heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, cast out demons*—that is, to restore people to health and also to their communities from which they have been ostracised and estranged, leprosy and possession being social diseases. And here, the worthiness of the recipient is determined solely by their need: it is the sick who deserve healing, the dead who deserve raising, the lepers who deserve cleansing, the demoniacs who deserve releasing—and who deserve it freely given.

This is all, of course, a sign of a more profound gift, nothing less than the kingdom of heaven itself, which by the grace of God, is what we have all been made worthy of, even though it is much much more than any of us could possibly believe we deserve.

As a political philosophy, I am sure that the powers-that-be or want-to-be will say that this utopian ideal is ludicrously unrealistic. A gift-economy is no way to run a modern nation-state in late-stage capitalism. Fortunately, the Christian moral imagination is unfettered by what is political feasible or fiscally responsible in the setting of its regulative ideals. And certainly, the life of the Church, even if not the State, must be governed by these ideals in the horizon of our striving.

This is, of course, why the Church offers so much of what it does for free: it gives without pay—and relies instead on the offerings generously given by the faithful. Here at St Mary Magdalen's every Sunday High Mass costs around £600 to run; but we would never dream of charging anyone to come. As far as I know, there are no churches that do so; but some churches do require payment for entry outside of service times. And the Church of England imposes statutory fees for some services, including weddings and funeral. That these are driven by financial

necessity does not make them any less scandalous, any less theologically problematic in light of the injunction to give without pay. It reflects at least a lack of trust that the beneficiaries of these gifts—pilgrims; grieving families; couples to be wed; worshippers, like you and me—will reciprocate and contribute, through our own generosity, to the Church's ability to keep giving without pay.

Whether this lack of trust is justified is, at least in part, up to us, who have it within our power to show that an economy of mutual gift-giving is possible without formal contracts and fixed prices, driven instead by a generosity that is our response to God's generosity. We are to model to the world that this new kind of economy looks like. As I mentioned at the beginning of this homily, many of you are already doing this: make no mistake—you are not only volunteering at your church or giving towards its functioning, but you are bearing witness to the Kingdom of God.

Apropos of nothing, perhaps some others of you might want to do the same. If so, do speak with me after Mass.