

HOMILY – 20-09-20 – Pentecost 16 - Bishop Cam Venables

Readings: Exodus 16:2-15; Psalm 105:1-6, 37-45; Philippians 1:21-30; Matthew 20:1-16

While I was studying at St Francis College, in Brisbane, I remember participating in a Bible study led by a wise man called Dave Andrews. Early in the morning Dave led a small group of us into a park and invited us to listen, with eyes closed, as he read about an encounter between Jesus and some men who were suffering from leprosy. By listening to the reading in a park, rather than indoors at home, a different engagement with the text became possible. Dave invited us to imagine that we were there watching the encounter, standing with the disciples, and he primed our imagination with some questions: 'What are the people around you wearing on their feet?' he asked. 'Is it a hot day, and are you sweating?' and, 'In your imagination, what does Jesus look like when he smiles?'

The lepers approach your group, breaking societal rules, and you imagine leaving the road with the other disciples, to get away from the risk of contamination. How do you feel as you look back and realise that Jesus has not followed you? As you realise that Jesus has remained on the road waiting for the lepers to come closer. What do those lepers look like? What do they smell like? And what is the reaction of the disciples around you, as Jesus leans forward to listen to them speak from ruined mouths? What is your reaction as you watch a rotting face become whole? And, in your imagination, would that healed man remain still, or dance with joy at the new freedom made possible by his healing?

That Bible study in a park so many years ago was one of the first times I had been invited to use my imagination when engaging with a Bible reading and it was confronting. I had previously found it easy to imagine myself as a leper, or a tax-collector, or... anyone else in the Biblical text in need of healing, acceptance, and grace. I found it much harder to imagine and recognise myself in the mind of a confused disciple, a judgemental Pharisee, or the fickle crowd. But, what a helpful way it has been to find new insight since then.

In this weekend's Gospel Jesus told a parable and invited his listeners to engage with it so that they may have new insight into the nature of God. A recurring theme in the Gospel of Matthew is the difference between the Kingdom of God, and any other kingdom known on earth. So, in this reading Jesus is remembered saying, 'the Kingdom of heaven is like...' which is a classic teaching technique. It could almost be interpreted as saying, 'Listen-up! I want to tell you something really important!'

Jesus went on to describe a landowner hiring labourers early in the morning to work in his vineyard. They happily agreed to a daily wage and began their work. Three hours later the landowner went out again and found more people looking for work so he hired them as well. At midday and at three o'clock he did the same, before finally, at five o'clock in the afternoon, he hired another group, who only worked for an hour before the sun set.

At the end of the day the laborers who had worked for twelve hours received the wage they had negotiated but before this they watched all those who had worked less hours receive the same amount. Understandably they were not happy and complained to the owner... and we probably each have some sympathy for them. Imagine the Enterprise Bargaining negotiation that would have followed if those vineyard workers had been part of a Union in our time?

However, this parable is not about fairness or wage equity it is about the extraordinary generosity of God who is the vineyard owner of the story. In this parable I think Jesus suggests that in the Kingdom of Heaven all people will be able to participate - those who can work the whole day and those who arrive late. That in the economy of God the needs of all people will be met... and no one will be left behind!

It would have been challenging for the people of that time to hear because it was not the way that the economic system operated. Surely, the more hours you worked... the more you could be paid... unless you were a slave in which case you were ripe for exploitation. In our Western economy I think we have a sense that you get paid for the hours you work, and that work is a good thing because not only do we have opportunity to provide food and shelter for ourselves we get to contribute to the economy.

As an aside - I think the laborers who worked the whole day actually had something significant that those who worked for one hour did not have. They had peace of mind because they had work and knew they would be paid at the end of the day. I think there's something hugely life-giving in that reality because at a very basic level we can feel valued and valuable when we have paid work. Conversely, we can feel rejected and worthless when we are unable to find work.

I imagine that those who had to wait eleven hours before they were hired did not have a great day. They did not have any guarantee that they would be able to provide for themselves or their families... and in that reality it's fair to assume they would experience some degree of anxiety and depression. From research today we well understand that the longer a person wanting to work is unemployed, the greater the risk becomes of them experiencing anxiety, depression, and even despair.

In some ways the parable this weekend would affirm the decision of our government to provide Job Keeper payments in this COVID disrupted time, and the consequent decision of most businesses and organisations to keep their employees on. However, it would also critique those businesses and organisations that have used Job Keeper to pay huge executive bonuses while reducing the hours of the people they employ.

With continuing lockdown and uncertainty in Victoria, the Anglican Archbishop of Melbourne, Dr Philip Freier, suggested last week that the cessation of Job Keeper at the end of this month would have a profound and negative impact on many individuals and families who are currently unable to work.

The parable suggests that whether you can work from home, or you can't work from home... you should be paid a daily wage. That is at least - enough to feed you and give you shelter. A qualifier is that in the parable those who were only employed at the eleventh hour wanted to work... and there are some - I think a minority - in our community who do not want to work... so, I don't think the parable talks about them!

This week please join with me in praying for all in our world who long to find work but are unable to do so. And, for all who have lost their employment because of COVID disruption and can no longer pay their bills.

Please also join with me in imagining yourself as the worker in today's parable who worked for only

one hour before being paid! I suggest this because I think if we imagine ourselves in that place it is likely we will receive new insight into the extraordinary, and even absurd, generosity of God! And, in God's grace, we may even choose to allow something of that generosity to become part of who we are, and how we live.

Friends, please join with me in prayer...

Life-giving God,

we give thanks for your generosity and grace,
and ask to be guided and formed by your Spirit this week;
so that your Kingdom can come, and your will be done,
in our lives, and in the life of the world.

We pray in the name of the one who said,
'the last will be first, and the first will be last...'

Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen