

Trinity 15

St Mary's, Barnes, Sept 24th 2017

Matthew 20, 1-16

I love the parable we have just heard-the look of sheer delight on the faces of those who were paid a whole day's wage for an hour's work, the sense of grievance of those who had sweated the whole day through and only got what they had agreed. Jesus did not of course tell this startling story as a blueprint for how to run a business. But the context in which he told it, makes the meaning clear.

As you know the central message of Jesus was the kingdom of God. He claimed that the long awaited and longed for rule of God in human affairs time of God had come with him, in his message and his healings. He told people to re-think their lives and become the kind of people who are at home in this kingdom, the meek, the pure in heart, those who hunger and thirst to see right prevail. He invited people to live like this and enter it. Many people heard him gladly, especially those on the margins of society, and he made a point of particularly welcoming them, even eating with them, a special sign of solidarity. He fraternised with tax collectors, people who collaborated with the hated Roman occupiers and other sinners who were not observant of the religious law. For this he was strongly criticised by some. It is against the background of this criticism that we are to understand the parable. As the landowner said "Why be jealous because I am generous". God goes beyond strict fairness to embrace and be generous with everyone.

There is a wonderful sermon by Chrysostom, the 4th century Archbishop of Constantinople which is read every Easter in the Orthodox church.

If anyone is devout and a lover of God, let them enjoy this beautiful and radiant festival.
If anyone is a grateful servant, let them, rejoicing, enter into the joy of his Lord.
If anyone has wearied themselves in fasting, let them now receive recompense.
If anyone has labored from the first hour, let them today receive the just reward.
If anyone has come at the third hour, with thanksgiving let them feast.
If anyone has arrived at the sixth hour, let them have no misgivings; for they shall suffer no loss.
If anyone has delayed until the ninth hour, let them draw near without hesitation.
If anyone has arrived even at the eleventh hour, let them not fear on account of tardiness.
For the Master is gracious and receives the last even as the first; He gives rest to him that comes at the eleventh hour, just as to him who has labored from the first.
He has mercy upon the last and cares for the first; to the one He gives, and to the other He is gracious.
He both honors the work and praises the intention.
Enter all of you, therefore, into the joy of our Lord, and, whether first or last, receive your reward.
O rich and poor, one with another, dance for joy!
O you ascetics and you negligent, celebrate the day!
You that have fasted and you that have disregarded the fast, rejoice today!
The table is rich-laden: feast royally, all of you!
The calf is fatted: let no one go forth hungry!
Let all partake of the feast of faith. Let all receive the riches of goodness.

But what about that sense of grievance that might be felt by the faithful at this equal welcome given to the negligent? The lifelong churchman who sees the converted reprobate going into the kingdom with him. The answer is also there in the parable of the

prodigal son, whose message is the same as today's story, the sheer generosity of God. The elder brother who complains that the father never gave a welcoming party for him is told "My son, you are always with me, and everything I have is yours." (Luke 15, 11)

This message of the generosity, the sheer grace of God was central to the first Christians as they took their faith out of the bounds of Judaism to the gentile world in what is now Turkey. For it meant that non-Jews too were to be included in the new people of God being built up in Christ. You did not have to keep the whole Jewish law first, you could come to believe and be baptised and live in the Spirit of Christ. But as we know from St Paul's letters, this caused a problem. As some said, If God is going to accept us anyway, why bother? Why not just eat, drink and be merry? Why bother about personal discipline or church observance if it is not going to make any difference?

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, you may remember, was part of the resistance to Hitler and his policy of Aryanising the German people, including the churches. He founded the Confessing Church, which kept itself apart from the state church, and was eventually hanged for his part in the plot to assassinate Hitler. In 1937, only 80 years ago, he published a book called The Cost of Discipleship. He began

Cheap grace is the deadly enemy of our church. We are fighting today for costly grace. Cheap grace means grace sold on the market like cheapjack's wares. The sacraments, the forgiveness of sins and the consolations of religion are thrown away at cut throat prices... Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace

without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.¹

The message of the church is unchanging-it remains the sheer grace of God who takes us as we are, where we are, who indeed searches us out and to wait patiently with us wherever we try to hide. But to recognise that grace is at the same time to want to make a response to it. Recognition and response is the basis pattern of the Christian life. That response is a yielding of the heart, an offering of the life, a following, a discipleship to use the Biblical word.

But that still does not fully answer the question I posed before. If God takes us we are, whether we have sweated through the heat of the day or just slipped in at the last moment, what different does it make? Why bother?

There is a wonderful novel by Rose Macauley, at once wise and funny, The Towers of Trebizond. It begins with Aunt Dot coming out of church and getting on a camel to set off on a Christian mission to Trebizond her niece and her parish priest, Father Chantry Pigg. Standing on deck on board ship Father Chantry-Pigg suddenly turns to the niece and says “How much longer are you going to go on like this, shutting the door against God?” The question disturbed her as she knew she had an impediment in her life, but the priest continued “Shall you come back when it is taken out of your hands and it will cost you nothing? When you will have nothing to offer God but a burnt out fire and a fag end. Oh, he’ll take it, he’ll take anything we offer. It is you who will be impoverished for ever by so poor a

¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, Collins, 1959, p.35/6

gift. Offer now what will cost you a great deal, and you'll be enriched beyond anything you can imagine.²

That is why we should bother. Christian observance, personal discipline of life, discipleship, has nothing to do with trying to gain God's acceptance. We are accepted already. It has nothing to do with trying to get to heaven. Heaven is ours anyway, if we will have it. It has nothing to do with punishing ourselves. God does not want us to punish ourselves. It is simply that in making a serious response to the grace of God we are enriched, and the more serious the discipleship, the closer we keep close to Christ, the more we will be enriched. That enrichment is not about what will happen after death, it is about entering into the life of God now, letting the life of Christ, the life of love live in and work through us. It is about what the Orthodox call *theosis*; about fulfilling our vocation and destiny to be changed into the likeness of God who first made us in his own image with this in mind.

God takes us as we are, with whatever we sincerely offer. But he has in mind to enrich us far beyond anything we can imagine as we yield our hearts in responding; in serious following, in discipleship.

² Rose Macaulay, The Towers of Trebizond, Collins, 1956, p.71/2