

Sermon for Sunday 24 September 2017 (Trinity 15)

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As we set off for our lovely family holiday at the end of August, we encountered a problem. Grandson Zac had a wallet, containing a five euro note – his holiday spending money. Grand-daughter Jasmine had a purse, containing nothing yet -- as I didn't have another note to give her. However, I had five euros in small change and so this was safely installed in Jazz's purse. But Zac wasn't at all convinced; Jasmine seemed to have more and it wasn't fair. So Grampy Phil found a five euro note lurking in his wallet, but Jazz was most reluctant to swap her change. A tantrum threatened and was only forestalled when it was agreed to share the coins equally between the two children so that they each had a note and some money! Sighs of relief all round from the adults...until we heard wails of distress from Zac. All his coins kept falling out of his wallet and he realised what he needed was a purse, of which, of course there was only one and ... "It's not fair, Granny!"

You'll be relieved to know that I managed to find a second purse just as the taxi arrived to take us off and so both children climbed in, clutching their booty, well satisfied and content that fairness had been achieved. I was bemused and couldn't quite get a handle on how my well-meaning gifts, borne of love and generosity, had produced such tension --- and both parents were convinced that the purses would be lost before we got to Heathrow! (They weren't!) The whole incident was out of character a little for Zac, who's usually very laid back – but of course, he's at the age now when he really begins to understand that fairness matters.

It's not just children who care about fairness; adults want it, too. It gives us some assurance of order, predictability and control. It's based on what we deserve, how hard we work, how we behave and what we achieve. We live in and promote a wage-driven society where you earn what you get and where sometimes it's fair to receive a reward, sometimes a punishment. Sadly, however, fairness is often the measure by which we judge either a person or a circumstance and it can leave little room for love, acceptance, mercy, generosity or forgiveness.

This brings us to today's parable – the tale of a man who hired two groups of workers, one at the beginning of the day and one at the end of it and yet paid all of them the same wage, even though the latter group had only worked for a fraction of the time and the first had slaved away in the heat of the sun for hours. No wonder the first group grumbled; it really does appear to be a vastly

unfair action. But we remember that this is a parable and rather than judge the situation, and especially by our modern standards, we need to peel away some layers to see what Jesus wanted to teach his listeners—what he wants to teach each us.

Biblical scholars suggest that it is most unlikely that any landowner of the time would ever really have acted as did the one in the parable. Earning a fair wage for a fair day's work was as much the accepted practice then as now, and so Jesus is not commenting on the socio-economic standards of the day. However, if the rich man represents God and the workers stand for Israel, what Jesus is doing is to use the story to teach something about the relationship between the two, to reveal something tremendous about the nature of God. So what is the significance of the two groups? Obviously, the first group of workers were the ones who'd turned up early, or were strong or who had good reputations as conscientious labourers – in other words, worthy and reliable people. The second group perhaps consisted of those who were late getting to the market place, or maybe they weren't as strong or as industrious or as honest; for whatever reason they were the people that no-one else wanted, the rejects.

So we understand that the landowner's beneficence extended not just to those who had earned it, but also to those who needed it. The judgement and the gift were his and his alone to make and were not to be decided either by those who considered themselves worthy, or by those holding earthly authority. It was to be decided rather through love, acceptance, forgiveness, mercy and generosity.

The parable follows on from Peter's question in the previous chapter, (19) where he asked, "Look, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?" Although Jesus reassured them then, this is a reminder and a warning to the disciples about their own attitudes. Just because they have followed him and been with him throughout his ministry, this doesn't mean that they will remain the favoured few for all time or that they will become rich and famous in their turn. There will be room for newcomers, for those who arrive later – and the rewards for faith will be given through God's grace and not from any "earned" merit on the part of individuals.

As present-day disciples, that warning stands for us, too. Being a Christian in a worshipping community, it can be tempting to think that we are part of God's inner circle, the special hard-working, reliable ones who are called early. It can come as a bit of a shock to realise that God is out in the market place still calling to those who are less reliable, late, those who have been rejected. It can be even more of a jolt to realise that he offers to them the same grace that he offers to us, that he showers us all with the same generosity. It can seem so unfair that we may want to shout with Peter, "Look we have done all this -- what then will we have?"

Yet the truth is that we can never earn God's rewards, because in our own strength we are sure to fail. Nothing we can do or say, no prolonged service, no amount of good deeds, will ever merit or deserve all the generosity he pours upon us; we are very blessed that God's understanding of fairness is not the world's, otherwise we would be very poorly paid! God in his mercy looks beyond our productivity, our accomplishments, and our failures and recognises that there is more to us than what we have done or left undone. He doesn't make contracts with us, but he makes promises to us. He promises us everything and demands nothing in return. When he fulfils his promises, he is not rewarding us –he is simply showering us with his generosity because he loves us.

I gave Zac and Jasmine holiday money simply as a token that I loved them. Sadly, the gesture went adrift as the gifts were received not with heartfelt gratitude, but with questioning and with grumbles because things were not as expected. We re-act in the same way sometimes to God's generosity. Like Zac and Jasmine, we quibble over details and aren't quite satisfied and there's always more to ask for. We take His gifts for granted, we expect them and then undervalue them--- and there's unfairness for you. Yet God still keeps on giving.

In God's world, there is more than enough for everyone So let us now give thanks to God for his overflowing generosity; a generosity which extends to all who need it, all who love and serve him, all who open their hearts to him. The judgement and the gift are his and his alone to make, meted out in love, acceptance, forgiveness, mercy and grace.