

Sermon on Fourth Sunday of Creation Time 2017 – All Saints Parish Church Wokingham

By John Boylan, Authorised Lay Preacher.

Reading: Matthew 20.1-16

There's a story of an old priest who having served the Lord for 50 years finally passed away and joined the queue outside the Gates of Heaven. To pass the time he tried to start up a conversation with a younger man behind him, wearing a leather jacket, chewing gum and who badly needed a shave. The priest didn't have much luck as the younger man barely grunted in reply and kept nervously looking around as if he was expecting something nasty to happen. Suddenly, the Gates were flung open and St Peter came bounding down the queue heading straight towards the priest, with his arms open and a big smile on his face. Well, the priest stepped out of the queue and waited to receive a big welcome in recognition of all the years serving God. But St Peter rushed straight past him and almost threw himself on the shifty looking man and started hugging him and laughing in delight. Then with his arm around the other man St Peter lead him back into Heaven saying "great to see you" as he shut the Gates. Well it was all too much for the priest and he shuffled to the front of the queue and called after Peter saying that there must be a mistake. "Surely it's me you want?" St Peter turned and shook his head. "No, he said, no mistake. "But I served the Lord for 50 years" the priest exclaimed, "can this man have done more than me for the Lord?". "Well" said Peter "the thing is that up here we work on results. Now when you preached, the congregation fell asleep. But this man was a taxi driver in Wokingham. When he drove, people prayed!"

Life's just not fair, is it? Or is it? The parable we heard today from Matthew raises the question of perceived fairness in our daily lives. If you have younger children or grandchildren, I bet you'd like a penny for every time you heard them say "but it's not fair; he's got more than me; she did it first; why can't I have another ice cream!" We seem to be born with a sense of fairness which cuts in from a very early age, even before the age of reason. And maybe this is why that as we develop a moral code of justice and equality on which we base our lives our sense of fairness can be a bit ego-centric. Perceived fairness is not necessarily rational and it can be very subjective. What looks right to you may not look right for others. Despite our maturity how often do we define our assessment of fairness in terms of not only what seems right to us but also for us. There is the child in all of us and our version of fairness may sometimes reflect or bring out the emotion of our own hopes, needs and expectations and not those of others. Today's parable brings this out.

Did you ever see a film or TV series where every the main character had to make a decision a little animation of a red devil appeared on his shoulder and whispered negative ideas in his ear. This of course

was countered by a little angel who then appeared on the other shoulder and argued the opposite case. Do you remember it? I can't remember anything more about it. Anyway, I do like the idea. And I can tell you that my little devil went into overdrive on today's reading from Matthew.

He was very persuasive: "Wouldn't you be really annoyed if that happened to you? I bet you would. It's not fair, they didn't deserve more than the others, bunch of losers getting away with it again! Why did the boss give them the same? What a whimp. That's the sort of thing that causes trouble. You can't have hand outs, it's not an honest day's work. It's just not fair!"

And to be honest, taken at face value and viewed in a contemporary setting, it's not difficult to relate to this viewpoint. It's so easy to get into negativity, and this is one of those parables that still doesn't sit quite comfortably. It's almost on a par with the Prodigal Son.....but let's not go there.

Anyway, then the more rational Angel on my other shoulder cut in: "Ah, but wait a minute. Did the guys that worked all day get what they had agreed with the boss? "Well yes, but..." "And did they lose out on anything?" "Well no, but..." "so actually, they got what they wanted and expected but suddenly it wasn't good enough?" "Well yes, but..." and then they wanted the other guys who incidentally also had families to feed but just hadn't been chosen in the first group, to get less? How would that have helped any of them? Oh, and while we are at it, wasn't the boss entitled to give what he wanted to whoever he wanted?" "Well yes..." "yes what?" "Yes, but it's not fair, is it?"

This parable is unique to Matthew and if you look at the commentaries several suggest that it was inserted to try and explain the message Jesus gave in Matthew's previous chapter about the rewards for following him which finished with the confusing words "many who are first will be last, and the last will be first" (Matt 19.30). Our parable today attempts to add clarity through the story we heard and this tie ends with a clearer version, "the last will be first and the first last". (Matt 20.16).

But I think there is far more to it than that. Look at the context in which the parable is set. Firstly, being a day worker was not easy or any guarantee of regular employment. These men had to wait in the town square and hope that someone needed extra work or seasonal tasks done. There would normally be more a lot more men than there was work so anyone offered the chance to earn any money would jump at the opportunity. After all, many would have families to feed and support and there was no unemployment benefit, social services or foodbank to fall back on. Given the choice of men, it was the lucky ones who got the jobs and were able to provide for their families. The others waited all day in hope but invariably went home with nothing. In this context, the words "Give us this day our daily bread" mean so much more and are a real entreaty to God to provide for his people.

So our parable probably doesn't reflect the normal situation. In our story everyone gets lucky which was unlikely to happen in real life. I'm sure that any workers employed late on in the day would be astounded at their good fortune first in being taken on so late in the day and second where they to be

paid a full day's money. And who wouldn't? But it's a parable and this just sets the scene for the moral. This act of generosity on behalf of the land owner immediately set an expectation in the workers who had been at it all day. So when they only received a day's wage its clear they were not happy about it, even though it was what they had originally signed up for and expected to receive. And in one move, these labourers not only show their resentment at the land owner's generosity even though it didn't affect them, but also start to begrudge the 'late' workers their reward. And that's the issue, the example of the darker side of human nature. But how many times does it happen in real life situations? In this particular case the labourers assess their lives not by what they have received from God or in this case the Land Owner, but by what they didn't receive and in doing so end up comparing and defining their own contracted reward in negative terms against the perceived unwarranted luck of others.

The parable when looked at through this rather disagreeable view, becomes as relevant today as it was then.

Let me give you an example, when I was working, every year the annual pay review was a complete nightmare. For a start, everyone thought they deserved the biggest rise going and would then be demotivated when they got a smaller pay rise than the self-inflated figure they thought they should be paid. Others who were initially happy with their rise, on discovering that someone else had got a bigger rise or was on a higher salary to start with became equally disgruntled and the joy at getting the rise was turned into anger because it wasn't enough. It didn't matter how many conversations we had about making decisions based on their personal remuneration package they invariably argued about someone else was receiving.

The parable raises very simple questions, but if we think about them in the context of the issues in our lives, it can be uncomfortable. Do we count our blessings or focus on our misfortunes? Do we give thanks for what we have or focus on what we don't have? Do we live with a spirit of gratitude or envy? In a competitive world are we selfish or compassionate? Of course, it's never as black and white as this and we probably demonstrate or act in all of these ways at different times. But if one replays those questions again, relating them to our personal issues, it really gives food for thought about our focus , motivation and behavior.

So, I want to do a very quick piece of congregation participation although I hasten to say that this is entirely personal and not for sharing with others. This is about you and for you. So, In the pews you'll find two small bits of paper. I invite you to quickly write on one piece of paper a blessing from God, something that you are thankful for. Then, on the other piece of paper, write down a resentment you have, a grudge, something that makes you personally angry, something that you are envious of or think you lack or something that you are not proud of. Now place one piece of paper face down in the palm of each hand. Now, which one weighs the most? Yes, they are both physically the same weight, yet

spiritually one of them is dragging you down whilst the other one is light as a feather and is a joyous reminder of God's love.

And now I want you to choose one of the pieces of paper and screw up the other. The one you decide to keep, I want you to take home as a reminder. It doesn't matter which one, the choice is yours. It's the reminder that one drags you down whilst the other lifts you up, that is important.

The message here is that God's love and his generosity towards us as demonstrated by the land owner in our parable, is infinite, knows no bounds and is for everyone. So where are we in the story? Do we work hard all day or do we come late to the party? Only you will know but either way God's love and generosity is there for all and does not begrudge any of us. If we recognize that and accept it, that is truly the greatest of all blessings and one for which we should be truly grateful.

Amen