

Sunday Sermon

Revd Canon Charles Jenkin – 20th September 2020 – Trinity 15

Jonah 3.10 – 4.end; Psalm 145.1-8; Philippians 1.21-end; Matthew 20.1-6

The Gospel reading for today really doesn't sound fair or right, does it? As good employment practice goes today, it fails the test of justice in work. How can it be right for two people to be paid the same, whether they have worked all day or for just an hour in the evening doing the same job. An employer today that behaved like the landowner in the Gospel on a regular basis would find himself facing multiple employment tribunals.

However the whole point of the parable is that the Kingdom of Heaven is not about fairness; it's about generosity. The ways of the world are not the same as the ways of heaven. We will not get to heaven because God thinks on balance that we are decent hardworking chaps and lassies. Rather the kingdom of heaven is open to us because God is loving and generous, and not because we will have any right to be there.

To put a finer point on it, heaven will have lots of people who really haven't worked for it very much, and if you do not rejoice in that, then perhaps you don't really belong there yourself. Because the kingdom of heaven is about an economy of generosity rather than an economy of fairness. The difficulty is that most of us, most of the time, work with a moral compass based on what we think is fair and just.

Of course, in this life, we do certainly have to think about fairness and justice. Human society simply does not work without notions of fairness and justice. The point of the parable is that heaven is different. Heaven is fundamentally about generosity. And when we pray for God's kingdom to come on earth, as we do every time we pray the Lord's Prayer, we are praying, actually, that on earth there will be more generosity. We are praying that human concepts of fairness and justice will be leavened, salted, with divine concepts of love and generosity. In truth, heaven operates with a different kind of justice.

And the questions is, do we rejoice in this? Do we rejoice that heaven is like that; that it will be different from this world. Do we see our church as a community of generosity? Do we see ourselves as people of generosity; generous in all sorts of ways? Do we struggle daily with the real tension between living in this world, with all the necessary concepts of fairness and justice that are needed for people to get along together on one hand, and on the other hand responding to our call to live as children of God with our hearts in heaven?

To be Christian is to live, willingly, with this tension, and not to let it harden our hearts. As St Paul writes in the letter to the Philippians, it's not easy. It is a struggle. But in this letter to his favourite church in Philippi, St Paul also writes about how this vision of the generous Gospel he has received and which he teaches, is more precious to him than anything else. And so he serves Christ in this world, with all its struggles and tensions, but also with confident hope in his vision of the divine generosity of heaven, where those tensions are resolved by the love of God.

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Moreover, divine generosity is not just about being generous with possessions. Being generous with possessions is important, but so is being generous in spirit. We are called to be generous with forgiveness, just as God is generous in forgiving us. We are called to be generous in respect of other people's failings and limitations and irritations, just as God is generous about our own failings and limitations and irritations.

As a second wave of the coronavirus looms, and renewed restrictions make us increasingly cross about things, a spirit of generosity is essential. There will be lots of cross people about as they cope with the stress. There is an awful lot of temptation to be judgemental. We ourselves will get cross too. But a divine generosity of spirit will help us to keep calm and carry on, forgiving others their mistakes and edginess; being sources of peace to those around us.

In this life, our call as Christians is to allow the generosity of heaven to leaven the lives of fairness and justice that we try to live. As Christians it is not enough to be fair and just; we must be generous too, in all matters. In other parables Jesus underlines how a failure to embrace generosity makes us unfit for heaven. There are of course limits to how generous we are able to be in this life, but in heaven there will be no such limits and that is what will make it heaven indeed. Amen.

CJ. 20.09.20