

Year A, Proper 20, 2023; 27 September 2023

Jonah 3.10-4 end; Psalm 145.1-8; Philippians 1.21-end; Matthew 20.1-16

Where to begin? We begin by reminding ourselves of last Sunday's gospel. Peter comes to Jesus asking how many times must one forgive. Jesus replies saying not seven times, as Peter in his magnanimity suggests but seventy-seven times. Or as in my preferred reading seventy times seven. Jesus follows this exchange with the telling of the Parable of the Unforgiving Slave, who receiving abundant mercy is unwilling to show mercy to someone who in turn is indebted to him. The implication is that we who have received divine mercy are to extend this mercy to others. Earlier in Matthew's gospel Jesus says to the twelve, 'You received without payment; give without payment.' Or as in another translation 'Freely ye have received, freely give'. (Mt. 10.8)

Today's parable of the Labourers in the Vineyard makes a different point but in a similar vein. What might it be? Before giving an answer it is worth mentioning that in both this week's and last week's parable Jesus uses the backdrop of first century economic realities in the telling of these two parables. In both cases it is about what is owed. In the Parable of the Unforgiving Slave the undergirding economic reality is of debts owed that need to be paid back. In today's parable that of the Labourers in the Vineyard it is about the wages owed after a day's work. The backdrop here is the economic reality of day labourers (Tageslöhner) in the Greek/Roman world.

Lucille and I have recently had reason to consider the reality of day labourers in Austria as we have experienced a number of them first-hand. The top floor of the building we live in was recently vacated by a firm of accountants Leitner and Leitner. This has afforded the owners of the building an occasion to start extensive renovation work on the offices, which has included the seemingly unending removal of tons of asbestos, plaster, metal rails etc. Why I mention this is because on some days more than 30 men appeared in groups of 10 to 15 removing the rubble throughout the day. They were mostly Eastern Europeans possibly from Romania and Bulgaria. They were modern-day day labourers. How they are remunerated it would be of interest to know. The work they were carrying out during the day in the hot weather over the last weeks was painstaking, back-breaking like that of the Labourers in the Vineyard. We can well imagine that if someone turned up at the last hour and was given the same wage at the end of the day, as those who have been labouring from the first hour of the day, these men started at 7am and worked to at least until 5pm, with breaks I hasten to add – the all-day labourers would be more than a little miffed. It would seem unfair, as today's parable underlines. It is unfair, especially given the precariousness of their lives.

What is the purpose of the parable? It is as Jesus states to help us to gain an understanding of the economy of the kingdom of heaven and by talking about the kingdom of heaven Jesus is making something known about the nature of God. What is the kingdom like? What is God like? What are we to be like? What we learn is that we are being pushed, kicking and screaming in some cases, by God to a new understanding of God, what the Kingdom of God is like and what we should become, but to do so Jesus tells parables. We get it. It isn't fair, but this is not the point. Parables like epigrams do not see all sides or make multiple points. They tend to make one point, but that one is brought home to us. And the point here is the scope of God's mercy. In the words of the Psalmist, 'As far as the east is from the west, so far he removes our transgressions from us.' (Ps. 103.12)

In the first telling of the Parable of the Labourers in the Vineyard was Jesus telling it against the disciples whom he had first called to join him? Is this a question we can ask? Had the first disciples possibly started grumbling about those who had only recently joined Jesus' entourage. Did they ask, why do you treat them like one of us? We who have endured so much for your sake? When Peter goes to Jesus with his question about how many times he should forgive, only to be told seventy-seven times, Peter has asked the question against himself. Elsewhere in Matthew's gospel Jesus says to the disciples, we detect a sense of exasperation, 'Are you also still without understanding? `or as in another translation, 'Are you still so dull?' (Mt. 15.16) or in John's gospel when Philip says to Jesus, 'Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.' Jesus said to him, 'Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.' (John 14.8,9)

Many scholars believe that Matthew's gospel was written between 80 and 90 of the Common Era, Anno Domini, in the year of the Lord. Christian communities had formed. We encounter these communities in the letters of St Paul, in the Acts of the Apostles and in the Book of Revelation with its message to the seven churches: Smyrna, Ephesus, Laodicea, Philadelphia, Sardis, Thyatira and Pergamum. In compiling the gospel was Matthew thinking how to integrate newcomers into the community of believers against the backdrop of the Labourers in the Vineyard. And how newcomers to the faith and latecomers to the community are to be welcomed and integrated. They are equal. It doesn't matter how late they come, if they make the true confession with all that that entails, 'You are the Messiah, the son of the living God.' (Mt. 16.16) The baptism service makes it clear what this confession entails: 1. turning to Christ as Saviour, 2. submitting to Christ as Lord and 3. coming to Christ, the way, the truth and the life. Submitting here meaning to come under God's sending out, God's commissioning.

How does this play out in a Christian community, we can ponder. I have some experience in this. It means that when people come to Christ Church say we welcome

them as we do every Sunday. If they are Christians or identify as Christians we welcome them. We trust them. This goes for enquirers and those who are curious as well. To stay in the economic frame of reference we provide an advance of trust, a credit of trust. Of course we are curious about where people come from. How they have been nurtured in the faith. How they have come under his sending. What we can learn from them and what they might be able to learn from us. After all being a Christian is about being a learner as the root meaning of the word disciple implies so that together we might become mature in the faith. That last phrase is important and something we should be looking for in ourselves and others. Is there a desire in us, a transforming fire burning in us, to become mature in the faith. Is there a commitment to allow the Christian faith to impact on my outlook, my values, how I order my life. Does it involve sacrifice? Am I ready to subordinate my desires to aiding the proclamation of the good news of Christ that all might come to Christ and be reconciled by him? Am I hindering or helping? Is there a willingness and a readiness to walk with others even if I must take myself back? Is there a readiness to accept difference? Is there a desire to be open to what God can do in my life?

I have wandered somewhat from today's parable, which tells us in no uncertain terms that the last will be first and the first last, (a phrase Jesus repeats later in Matthew's gospel), if we don't learn to live within the new economy of grace generously, which is the divine economy of God. We trace this economy at work in Jesus' answer to Peter. 'Not seven times, but I tell you, seventy-seven times.' We see it in the Parable of the Unforgiving Slave, who has his entire debt cancelled and is released from his bondage. And in today's Gospel when we hear how those who come at the last hour will receive the same wage as those who in come at the first hour. This is a topsy turvy economy, where things do not conform to our human measure. Our human measure will not do. We need "the wings of faith to rise within the veil, and see" the loving kindness of the Lord God's abounding mercy

In ending allow me a word about Jonah. Why does Jonah end up in 'a whale'? Jonah ends up in a whale because God's will is that he Jonah should be an instrument of God. God's will be not to be thwarted. When Jonah is told that he must go to the people of Nineveh to tell them of the impending doom about to befall them unless they turn from their ways and repent, he heads in the other direction. He heads west. And to get away as far as possible from Nineveh he gets on a boat. Only after his adventure in the whale does he do what is required of him, but he does it grudgingly. He knows that God is merciful, but the mercy he receives he cannot extend to others.

The Hebrew people knew that God's economy is other, but they also acknowledged in the telling of the story of Jonah that they found it hard to live in it and to extend it to others. The God whom Jonah worshipped would even show mercy to a foreign people in a foreign city who did not worship him, because he is the God of mercy. What was

required of the people of Nineveh? What was required of them was repentance that they might turn from their ways and live. In summary the divine economy is other. It is a challenge to live in this economy, but it is vital for health of the Body of Christ and each and every one of us gathered here.

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