**LET GO OF BEING RIGHT AND CHOOSE LIFE**

**Sermon preached for 11.00am Sung Eucharist**

**St. Edmundsbury Cathedral**

**Sunday 20 September 2020**

Wages at the BBC have been in the news again this week. Gary Lineker is taking a pay cut. The top ten earners list now includes four women, impressive presenters like Zoe Ball and Fiona Bruce. The gender pay gap at the BBC is a bit lower than last year. Progress in the right direct too for employees of black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds. But still much more to do. And, for all their skill, celebrity presenters earning so much is disturbing, with so many people redundant or furloughed and suffering in the pandemic.

In contrast to all this we have this morning’s Gospel: the workers in the vineyard, their hours and their different wages. [[1]](#footnote-1) If you looking for biblical support for equal pay, you need to look somewhere else. You don’t need to look far in the Bible to find support for social justice and equality, but this parable is not about that. Nor is it about gratuitous generosity, although we believe that is God’s nature, and the owner of the vineyard mentions generosity when the all-day workers complain. No, the key to the parable is right at the end, and what comes immediately before. At the end, Jesus adds the moral of the story, matching his teaching elsewhere, “the last will be first and the first will be last.” Immediately before this story Jesus is talking to his disciples. Peter has said “Lord, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?” Jesus responds “you will inherit eternal life. But many who are first will be last and the last will be first.”

Jesus is checking the all-too-familiar tendency to be self-righteous, and the inclination to feel better than other people – something which we Christians are very good at. Once again Jesus comes down hard on superiority and self-righteousness. Why? Because it kills the soul. As St Paul famously puts it, “If I understand all mysteries and all knowledge, if have all faith and give away all my possessions, but do not have not love, I am nothing”. [[2]](#footnote-2)

It’s a trap we all fall into. When we point out errors and mistakes, what motivates our criticism? Mistakes are part of life, part of being human. And we need feedback from other people. But it’s good to take care with the murky motives for our judgement. Think of an incident this week when you were self-righteous, when you felt right. Notice you are not the only one, everyone has an example in mind. Now be generous to yourself as God is generous and forgiving to you.

The desert fathers and mothers of the early centuries of Christianity knew about these things: our need to be right, and the multiple reasons we use to justify pointing our other people’s inadequacies. On another occasion, Abba Poemen was asked, “If see my brother sinning, should I hide the fact?” Abba Poemen replied, “At the moment we hide a brother’s fault, God hides our own. “At the moment we reveal a brother’s fault, God reveals our own.”

Another distinctive character Moses the Black taught: “If you are occupied with your own faults, you have no time to see those of your neighbour.” These are blunt insights, but share with a generous spirit too. Once some old men went to see Abba Poemen and asked, “We see some of the brothers falling asleep during divine worship.  Should we wake them up?” Abba Poemen said, “As for me, when I see a brother who is falling asleep during worship, I lay his head on my knees and let him rest.”

This is challenging teaching for our society with so much unchecked expression, so much righteous outrage on social media. It’s a challenging teaching for our society in which the first tend to remain first and the last are so often forgotten. And it’s a challenging teaching for our society which claims our life, our truth and liberty come from within ourselves. And that’s the deeper truth in all this.

Although we tend to think of ourselves as the centre of the Universe, in fact we are a small part of the immeasurable reality of God. We who are so caught up in ourselves, so easily forget God’s presence, God’s grace, God’s call to come alive.

Through regular thanksgiving, regular praise, and through regular self-examination, we can drench ourselves in the goodness of God. We do this “not because we are hopelessly guilty, but because we can learn to inhabit God’s goodness”. [[3]](#footnote-3) We do that by regularly remembering God’s generosity, God’s kindness, a God’s abundance. That is the reality in which we live.

The psalms encourage us to praise God from the rising of the sun to its setting. The more we praise God, the more we discover there is be thankful for. One morning recently I opened my bedroom window to see an abundance of birds on a tree close by: eight or nine long-tailed tits flitting about, accompanied by some blue tits, and with two wrens and a goldcrest. All buzzing about, alive and energetic. Pure abundance! Alleluia!

The adage says “People wrapped up in themselves make very small parcels”. God invites us to break through the wrapping and to become a much bigger gift, to become alive in God’s infinite grace and mercy.

*Canon Matthew Vernon*

*Canon Pastor & Sub Dean*

1. Matthew 20.1-16 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. 1 Corinthians 13. 2,3 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Angela Tilby in *Reflections on the Psalms* [↑](#footnote-ref-3)