



The Church of England
in Essex and East London

Diocese of Chelmsford

Sermon

Trinity 15 – 24 September 2017

by Bishop Stephen Cottrell

Today's readings are about extravagant goodness; or as Jesus says at the end of a most puzzling and irritatingly challenging parable – 'Are you envious because I am generous?' (Matthew 20.15)

This may not be a text that any right thinking economist, or for that matter a Chancellor of the Exchequer preparing an autumn budget statement, will have uppermost in mind, but it is a story that reveals some uncomfortable truths about generosity in general and the scandalous liberality of God in particular, and especially how God turns around our cherished expectations of each other.

It is a story about paying and being paid; about giving and receiving. So hold onto your pew and let's discover how this disturbing little story works, and what it might mean for us.

The landowner hires some men at the beginning of the day, and, to put it into today's pay scales, agrees a wage of, let us say, £80.00, a reasonably generous £10.00 an hour for an eight hour day.

But the harvest needs getting in. At noon there is still loads to do. So he hires more men; and because, let's remember, every human being is a bookkeeper at heart (perhaps keeping score is our greatest sin?) – those who were hired at noon discuss the rates with those who were hired in the morning and reckon that for their afternoon's labour they've got to be worth forty quid.

At three-o'clock more people are hired; and they probably think they'll get twenty. And at four, with the harvest having to be gotten in that day, the landowner in desperation goes back into town and rounds up everyone he can muster, even the ones we love to label workshy and feckless. And he puts them to work. But before they even lift a finger they too would have asked their fellow workers, what does this chap pay, and reckoned they would be getting a tenner; enough for some beer when they got back to town.

Then the twist. The harvest is in. The work is done. The Landowner summons the manager to assemble the workforce and starting with the last each is given a sheaf of four crisp twenty pound notes – the ones who had worked for an hour down to those who had born the heat of the day and worked for eight.

And the first to benefit from this unbelievably good deal are the last: those had only put in an hour's work. They can't believe their luck. They pocket their wad and keep on walking, probably thinking some mistake has been made. But then, when more and more of them get the same, (and, yes,

because we do all keep scores all the time), they – because along with book keeping we also like bragging - tell the ones hired first, the ones waiting in the queue who've worked all day, that they got eighty quid for one hour's work. At first there is indignation at the injustice of it all. But then they probably think again. Start calculating. And reckon that if these wastrels get eighty pounds for one hour's work, then they are surely worth a cool 640!

But no. They get the same.

And now it turns again. The layabouts who were hired last laugh at the losers who came first and who had worked all day but ended up getting the same. And those who've worked all day are furious – quite understandably, quite justifiably - because by any human reckoning this way of doing business isn't fair. They complain to the landowner: how could you treat us this way, we who have worked so hard but ended up getting the same as those who worked so little?

And the landowner replies: "Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me the usual daily wage? Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?" (Matthew 20. 14-15)

And here's the point: it is one that pierces the heart, for it overturns the tables of our own point scoring, whereby we measure who is worth this and who should get that. God counts everyone in. He works by raising the dead, not rewarding the rewardable.

For if the world could have been saved by book-keeping, it would have been saved by Moses not Jesus! The law is good and necessary, but God gave it a good thousand years or so to see if anyone could pass a test like that and everyone failed. Indeed, we all fall short of being the people we want to be, let alone the people God wants us to be. So God gave up on salvation by the books. He cancelled everyone's debt. He wiped out everyone's record. He did it in the death of Jesus who shares what it is to be last, to be a loser, so we can all be put first. And he deals with us equally and completely. He is not impressed by our measurements. He offers a new creation and a new dispensation in the resurrection of the dead. This is heaven, where the last will be first and where everyone is welcome. And those who still insist on judging others, who keep their scorecards close to their heart? Well, they can go to hell.

Robert Farrar Capon has put it this way: 'Bookkeeping is the only punishable offence in the kingdom of heaven.'ⁱ

And what does this mean for us today? Well simply this: am I envious of God's generosity? Am I keeping scores, harbouring grudges, endlessly re-settling debts, bragging about my own wealth or even my own generosity?

Or am I rejoicing that God in Jesus Christ does not hold my sin, my envy or my greed against me; that he has counted me in; that salvation is free; that everything I have is on loan; is gift; is not mine to give, but mine to receive and share; and that there is nothing I can do, or need to do, to earn or deserve the wonderful generosity of God. Ah, but it might be worth copying. He rained down manna from heaven to the people of Israel. He gives us his blessings today. He wants us to be generous to others.

Therefore, remember the uncomfortable Christian truth, that generosity is measured not by how much you give, but by how much is left behind after you have finished giving. Widow's mites count more than a millionaire's millions in the kingdom of God. And more than anything remember whenever you are last – when you are feeling lost or useless or lonely - God puts you first. There is work to be done in his vineyard. He will give you what you need. His love is extravagant, challenging and uncomfortable. And you know what? It's just the way God is. And we had better get used to it.

ⁱ The Mystery of Christ, Pg. 395