

Highfield Road Uniting Church
Pentecost 18 - 1.10.2023
Psalm 103:1-18; Matthew 20:1-16

Reflection

*In the name of the Father and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.
 Amen.*

The parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard, just read for us, is one of the more confronting of all the parables of Jesus.

Notice that it's the kingdom or *rule* of God that is like the landowner's activity. It is not God who is the landowner. It's about how God works.

We can imagine the landowner going to the market place early in the morning to hire labourers for his vineyard. Perhaps it is harvest-time and there is urgency to get the crop in before the rain. After the breakfast break, he notices some workers without a job so he sent them to work also.

Twice more in the day he went to the market place and found labourers standing around without work. The day was getting on and the harvest was still to be got in. So, the landowner hired them too.

When it came to knock-off time he paid the shortest time workers a full day's wage. When those who had worked longer got the same, they grumbled loudly. Naturally they expected more for working longer hours in the hot sun but they just received the usual days-pay. And did they object!!

But the landlord replied, you got what was agreed, what have you got to be annoyed about. Take what belongs to you and go!

And here's the bit we might conveniently read over: the landlord says, "Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me. Or are you envious because I am generous?"

Sounds like God's climatic rebuke to Job in the book of that name. "Where were you when I created the heavens and the earth?"

The parable finishes with the familiar phrase, "so the last will be first and first will be last."

I wonder what the Patrick Corporation in charge of our waterfront in Australia would say if stevedores who hung around all day waiting for work demanded to be paid the same as those who started at six in the morning? The unions

know that such a thing is out of the question. In fact, it would be seen as ludicrous and absurd in today's world.

We know that the parable is not trying to tell us how to run our economic affairs today. It's saying something else. It alludes to the gift of life that we all inherit without price. Life is a free gift that cannot be valued in earthly terms. In God's gift of life that we all have is everything we need. Who are we to want more?

But what do you think? Do you think this teaching is simply about private morality and our personal response in order to be right with God and favoured in this life or the next? Or do you think that this teaching has something to do with the way we run our country, the economic decisions we make and the way we are governed? What are called 'structural' issues.

Every Sunday we say the words "Give us this day our daily bread" in The Lord's Prayer. It sounds simple enough; just a straight forward request for our daily needs of food and clean water for our survival. It is the one sentence in the prayer that asks for something material.

But we often skip over the word "daily." This word is the limiting factor in the prayer. We ask for just what we need to live a day at a time, no more no less. Every day we wake is sufficient, no matter what it brings, and there is enough over to share.

How is it then that we have become so acquisitive, own so much 'stuff,' always feel we need that little bit more for security, safety, or comfort? There seems to be an inbred *insecurity* in humanity that cannot be satisfied, especially if we think we have worked or fought hard to overcome that insecurity; harder than others perhaps,

Has this parable anything to do with national affairs?

Efforts are being made in our nation today to address the cancerous and socially dangerous imbalance between those who have and those who have not.

One glance at the daily news in responsible media reveals this imbalance, where for instance, 80% of property is owned by just a handful of landlords, whilst the homeless sleep rough. Where a cluster of CEO's are paid obscene amounts in salary and benefits when workers are struggling to put food on the table. Where the well off can use their economic leverage to become even wealthier while young people can only dream of owning a home.

And yet, whenever there is a move to redress the balance, nay-saying and vehement objection begins. You can't do that or my industry will collapse. You can't do that or you will upset the nature of competition. You can't do that because my bank balance will suffer and I've earned that money. You can't change rental laws or landlords will desert the market, properties become scarcer and rents will rise. Don't touch the tax concessions because I've built my nest egg on them and I deserve that in retirement.

Efforts to make moves for the public good are met with rejection from all quarters. The NIMBY response: "Not in my backyard," is familiar to us all. And I've coined another acronym. It's NOMBA: "Not on my bank account."

It seems that over recent decades our nation, in common with other Western societies, has developed a *national* insecurity that gives rise to increasing selfishness. Volunteerism is on the wane; and goaded by technology, strength of community is being exchanged for enclaves of private interest. Public service in politics and law has given way to 'might is right,' whatever you can get away with to survive and gain advantage, and 'winner take all.' Blatant deception is eroding faith in democracy, truth is the victim of tyranny,

Before we imagine our personal immunity from these trends, let us remember we are all complicit in society by the way we think, talk, vote, spend our money and influence the next generation.

It is a community responsibility to bring about change through changed thinking in each of us.

How can we overcome a sense of entitlement based on the measure of our own efforts, either mental or physical, as opposed to being satisfied with life as a free gift? How can we keep working for the good of the whole without feeling entitled to a greater share of its benefits than others.

Of course, this question has bedeviled the political and economic affairs of the nations for a couple of hundred years resulting in two world wars and ongoing conflicts and international enmity. Political experiments to foster greater equality have failed. And across the world, the rich get richer and the poor get poorer.

But where are we in this human condition of wanting more than we are already given because we've striven harder than others?

Franciscan Friar, Richard Rohr says this about it:

“We call this a sense of entitlement. ... When we grow up comfortable, we think we deserve a bit more; this really creates a high degree of unhappiness and anger in our society. ... There’s only one way to get us out of this sense of entitlement. Once in our lives we have to experience undeserved love at a deep, gut level. Where we didn’t merit it, we weren’t worthy of it; in fact, we were unworthy of it, and we got it anyway... Only this experience of divine mercy breaks down this entire way of counting.”

He goes on to say: *“What the Gospel says is “Stop expecting!” Entitlement is lethal for the soul. Everything is a gift—one hundred percent pure gift. The reason any of us woke up this morning had very little to do with us and everything to do with God. All twenty-four hours today are total gift. So, the only real prayer is to say “Thank you!” and to keep saying it ... and move into the wonderful world of grace, where everything is free.”*

We say “thank you” once again this morning in our celebration of The Lord’s Supper. Thanksgiving is the meaning of the word “Eucharist.” In the Great Prayer of Thanksgiving, we say thanks to God for the inestimable gift of life in Christ that is all we need.

The teaching of Jesus is to move us into a world where we are so grateful that we nothing lack, and so conscious of being blessed, day by day, that we need only think of how to give.

The call of Christ is to be so aware of the self-giving nature of authentic life that we want for nothing and are prepared to give for the sake of the other.

May God give us the grace to see and hear Jesus speaking in this parable and seek to follow its teaching in our everyday thinking as well as in the arrangement of our affairs for the good of the whole community, not just ourselves. And to God be the glory.

AMEN.

Now we are going to sing those earthy words by the great Charles Wesley, words given to hordes of farm labourers, and factory workers from those ‘dark satanic mills’ in the dawn of capitalism, during the industrial revolutions of early eighteenth-century England.

That any one of the likely singers would gain an interest in the financial world of the time, let alone adequate pay, was a forlorn hope. And yet they, like us,

are offered a shareholding in the divine enterprise to redeem a wayward world through the self-giving of a loving creator as known in Christ.

Old and revered words now, but words that still express profound gratitude for the action of God in Christ in redeeming us from human frailty to be shareholders with Christ in the saving of the world.

Let's sing this with the trademark sound of Methodist heartiness."

Alastair Pritchard