Trinity 15 (Proper 20)

20th September 2020

I wonder if you ever find yourself saying, either in your head or, worse, out loud something that makes you stop and think ‘oh dear - I sound just like my mother (or father)’. When I was little, part of the family routine was that I went out with my dad on a saturday morning to do the food shopping, or rather, we’d start on a Friday evening and spend a large part of Saturday doing it too. My dad was, and is, something of a grocery-aholic. I think he still averages about four different supermarkets per week and his knowledge of the special offers available at each is second to none. He couldn’t be more content than when he’s pottering around the aisles. That is, until it is time to go to the checkout. In the days when I was shopping with Dad life was relatively simple. Not for us the bewilderment of baskets only, ten items or fewer, self scanning, self checkout, unidentified item in bagging area, that there is today. He just had to choose a queue and join it. This was an important moment given that my dad thought he could predict the rate at which each queue would move but, in almost all cases he would choose badly and we would be standing in a stationary queue looking at the others moving along nicely. If in a proactive mood he might move to a different queue only to have that queue suddenly grind to a halt and the original queue move forward. In my dad’s case, the idea that the last should be first and the first last seemed all-too-true and proved deeply annoying.

Indeed, anger is one possible response to today’s gospel. Where is the justice in this story? You’ll recall that the landowner specifies that those who started work last should be paid first, making it obvious to those who had worked all day that everyone was getting the same. How can it be fair that the workers who toiled in the heat for the whole day, got the same as those who worked for just a couple of hours?

In verse one of Matthew 20 Jesus tells the disciples that ‘the kingdom of heaven is like this landowner’. Is this so? Is this the sort of justice that we can expect in the kingdom of heaven? How is that fair?

As we revisit Jesus’ parables again and again, it’s helpful to focus on the things that don’t quite feel right. To listen to our feelings and how we respond as individuals to what goes on in each of the stories. What’s your response to this story? Be honest with yourself. Maybe you do feel a sense of injustice… maybe there’s some confusion… maybe you are comfortable with this topsy-turvy rewards system.

What I want to think about with you this morning is what we might do with our response. What’s the next stage once we’ve recognised how a story makes us feel? As an illustration I’m going to look through the eyes of someone who finds this a difficult notion to swallow - the idea that it is right to give each of these workers the same pay for the work they have done… that the last will be first and the first will be last.

So imagine with me that my first response to today’s gospel is to be angry and confused. It’s simply not fair that all of these workers should get the same reward for the work they’ve done. I can’t believe that the kingdom of heaven is so unjust. Why should those who have done one tenth of the work get the same pay? Why should I have to wait ten minutes longer to pay for my baked beans in Morrisons than someone who’s just joined the queue next door?

Perhaps the key to understanding a little more about what’s going on in this parable, and to shine some light on our own righteous responses to the justice or otherwise of the story, is to ask the question: ‘whose kingdom is the kingdom of God?’

This seems like a silly question. But it’s worth thinking about. Perhaps what we see in this passage is not a representation of justice at all, but one of generosity… undeserved and incongruous generosity. And where do the ideas of deserving and congruity come from? They come from us. They’re not God’s. They’re our invention. They’re our attempt to try to make sense of this world… to label… to categorise… to decide what is right and wrong… our struggle to understand, to quantify, to control.

In times of great uncertainty, we yearn for answers… we are desperate for ways to feel like we are more in control. Like the Israelites in the wilderness, a prolonged sense of uncertainty may mean losing heart. With no clear destination in view we may be so focussed on the horizon that we lose sight of what is in front of us. The Israelites are so intent on complaining to Moses and Aaron about their lot that they fail to recognise the manna that God has provided. Moreover, when God does provide enough for everyone (as we find out later in Ch 16 of Exodus), there is hoarding and a failure to follow God’s will which no doubt leads to conflict and fractured relationships.

The beginning of Morning Prayer goes like this:

*The night has passed, and the day lies open before us;*

*let us pray with one heart and mind.*

Then there is a silence before the next part of the prayer.

During my time at college a little prayer formed in my mind which fitted neatly into this silence and I continue to say it every day in that space:

Open my heart, O God, to the gift of your Word, and my eyes to the signs of your Kingdom.

I feel like what I’m saying is help me Lord, through your Word, through your Spirit, to see things as you want me to see them. Help me to see things in a new way. Shine a light into the places where I have a particularly blinkered, particularly flawed, particularly ‘me’ way of reacting to things - where I fail to respond with generosity, with forgiveness, with love.

The great thing about scripture, and perhaps parables in particular is the way that, through them, God can undermine our trappings of humanity and religiosity and get to what is really underneath. They can, if we let them, move us on from the question ‘how do I feel about this’ to reflecting on why I might feel that way. What are our underlying motives and driving forces? What is it that makes the Israelites complain to Moses and Aaron constantly? What is it that makes the disciples try to outdo each other to be Jesus’ number one follower? What is it that so frustrates a septuagenarian in the queue at Sainsbury’s?

Uncertainty.

Uncertainty is so difficult to cope with - it can sap us of our energy and drag us down...

But uncertainty doesn’t have to be the enemy of confidence.

God’s generosity is God’s. God’s justice is God’s. He’s not playing by our rules. He’s playing by his and we must let go of our need to know… our need to be in control and we can allow ourselves to trust Him.

In my little prayer in the morning I say ‘open my eyes to the signs of your kingdom’ but I might equally say ‘help me to trust you’. Give me the confidence in you that I need to get through this day, this week, this year.

So, how do we feel about the first being last and the last first?

In his Letter to the Philippians, Paul says:

‘...to me, living is Christ, and dying is gain.’

He plays with worldly, human ideas of life and death. He treats living and dying, these seemingly stark opposites (like first and last) and turns them into a win-win. Living is Christ… dying is gain. In doing so he is urging the Philippians to live a life of faith in Jesus Christ which feeds their sense of togetherness. It’s a message about relationship, with God in Jesus and with one another in a community of faith.

It’s worth remembering that the parables that Jesus presents in the gospels are addressed to the disciples. Disciples who, by the time we reach Matthew 20 have already started squabbling amongst themselves, trying to figure out who is the best, the most righteous, the most holy, the closest to Jesus. Their relationships have started to break down through a preoccupation with earthly, human concerns… with a constant struggle to control, to understand on their terms.

The Israelites may moan and the disciples may crow about which of them loves Jesus the most, but the kingdom of God breaks into plain sight only when we let go of all this.

We are surely all struggling like the Israelites with the huge uncertainty of our times… we are perhaps, like the disciples, desperate to find some sense of order amongst all that’s going on, to work out what to do... where we fit... who we are...

But if we pause… take a breath… and for just a moment permit ourselves to believe in the incongruous, boundless generosity of God’s kingdom that we see in today’s gospel, things might become less uncertain for us. We might indeed find that uncertainty doesn’t have to be the enemy of confidence.

The message of today’s gospel seems to me to be that the kingdom of heaven will not conform to our earthly rules of fairness or status. God’s love for us is so great and his generosity so far beyond our imagining that it urges us to respond in a new way: to let go of our grasping for control and to ask God to show us the signs of his kingdom.

I’ll close with more words from Paul, this time from his Letter to the Ephesians Ch. 3. Perhaps this could be our prayer for today:

16I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, God may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, 17and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. 18I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, 19and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

20 Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, 21to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever. Amen.