

TRINITY 15 -2020

Isaiah 55:6-9

Phil 1:20-24

Mt 20:1-16

“My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, says the Lord “(Is 55). God’s ways are very different from human ways and we had better get used to it. The prophet Isaiah told his people in exile that God would restore his people Israel to glory and the new people of God would include Gentiles. God was not restoring Israel’s glory because the people deserved it, but because he is merciful. Even so, God’s mercy has to be accepted by living in obedience to his will, and that decision is not one that we humans can put off indefinitely. None of us know the day and the hour that we will shrug off this mortal coil when it may well be too late. Another important point is that those who accept God’s mercy and invitation to discipleship early in life should not expect a greater reward for doing so.

This point is clearly made by Jesus in the parable of the workers in the vineyard. Jesus told this parable to observant Jews who struggled with Jesus’ attitude to sinners, villains and Gentiles. The Pharisees were strict observers of God’s laws in order to protect the faith of Israel whose people had been chosen by God and enjoyed a special relationship with him. How was the purity of this relationship to be maintained if they allowed any riff raff into their fold? Jesus’ teaching that there are no VIP’s in the kingdom was a hard pill for the observant Jews to swallow.

In Jesus’ parable, the workers were given the same pay by the generous owner no matter how long they had worked. To the Jewish mind this was unjust – try it on a militant Trade Union and watch the reaction. The Jewish mind, and that of the current secular world is that any effort must be rewarded. Individual rights and rewards are more important than doing what is right and good for its own sake. This was Jesus’ point. God is just and this means that he does not reward us according to what we think we deserve, but by what he knows our needs to be.

Think of the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector praying in the Temple. The pious Pharisee gave God a long list of his religious observance and generosity presumably with the expectation that God would write this up in his file for future rewards. The despised tax collector didn’t even lift his head up, but he was the one that received God’s grace.

In the vineyard parable those workers who began work at the end of the day were the Gentiles, tax collectors and sinners, so you can see that treating them equally with God’s people who had struggled for centuries to keep God’s law, was contrary to human thinking. This is why in the Acts of the Apostles we read of some Jewish Christians who believe that Gentile converts should become Jews first. Yet the clear message of Jesus is that of equal treatment so it is understandable that some people say, “Why bother?’ and take the risk of doing nothing about God’s invitation to love him and live a life of discipleship or think they can leave it to what they think is their last minute.

St Paul faced a dilemma. He was happy to die in order to be with Christ, but he also realised that through serving others Christ was glorified in him. This is how we should be. We should not worry about rewards in the hereafter but get on with deepening our relationship with God and glorifying Christ in loving others as we love ourselves. A danger we face is that of superficial piety, namely rattling through the mass, galloping through the prayers, the rosary or the daily office in as short a time as possible. This is saying prayers not praying them. It would be easier to have a prayer wheel blowing in the wind to save us some effort. In our devotion, prayer is far more than saying things – it is to be in God's presence to listen and adore. Equally, thinking we are serving others simply by chanting the latest popular social justice mantras and 'cancelling' those who don't conform is really Pharisaic external piety. For Jesus, the real deal is those small acts of love and care that seem small, are unnoticed by the wider world, but bring healing and new life to those who receive them.

Unlike certain human ideologies where people are declared to be equal except some are more equal than others, In God's kingdom equality is a reality.

Msgr Harry Entwistle
September 2020