

SERMON AT GELORUP 22/9/2002: GEOFF CHADWICK: PENTECOST 18

(OS 25): MTT 20:1-16: “THE LABOURERS IN THE VINEYARD”

Today’s Gospel reading can be interpreted at so many levels. Perhaps I should just offer a few points from each of the levels.

Level 1. Words against Snobbery in the Matthean Church: A couple of weeks ago I mentioned how Matthew’s Gospel is compiled a sort of long sermon to a fledgling Christian Church of Jewish flavour. The writer, picks up material that he has from Mark’s Gospel and a few other sources and adapts it for the purposes of addressing the burning issues of that church at that time. Today’s parable is a classic example. This Parable, remembered from the time of Jesus is re-worked to address the issue of “snobbery” amongst the church members.

In this parable all the workers are paid the same regardless of when they started work: whether it was at the beginning of the day, middle of the day or the end of the day. At first this equal payment appears to be unjust and the early workers complain. (If there was a shop steward we could imagine a picket line beginning to form!) But the landowner silences them all:

“Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?’ So the last will be first, and the first will be last.” (Mtt 20:15-16, NRSV).

Here, the issue of the acceptability of early and late Christians is dealt with squarely. Matthew’s church had suffered the squabbles of snobbery. Those who had been

Christians for a long time were beginning to despise the new converts to the faith. One can almost hear them saying: “What do these ‘Johnny come lately’s’ think they’re about! How dare they upset the way we’ve run our church for the last 20 years or so!”

“Beware of snobbery” says the parable. “... the last will be first, and the first will be last.” (Mtt 20:16, NRSV).

Level 2: Words of Hope to the Jewish Church: Remembering that Matthew’s church was Jewish, and that the symbol of the vineyard was often used to represent the Jewish nation, it’s easy to see how this story was used to encourage those Jews who had chosen to follow the way of Jesus.

The Jews had always expected to be the ones who would receive the promises of God. Many had expected to receive such promises either ahead of the other nations or even at the exclusion of the other nations. Jesus’ parable turns this concept on its head. (Jesus in fact does this in many places such as in the parable of the wedding banquet). Yes, the early workers in the vineyard will get their reward but so too do the late workers. These late workers, those Jews who have found God a-fresh through the teachings of Jesus are not to be disheartened or concerned about their heritage.

“Be encouraged you Jewish converts” says the parable: “... the last will be first, and the first will be last.” (Mtt 20:16, NRSV).

Level 3: Social Justice: This is a story about unemployment. It is a story about dole bludgers. It is a story about justice. If we do not see this in the parable we have missed an important point.

In the parable, the men standing “idle in the market place” are in fact, the local unemployed. In Jesus’ day the market place was the local Centre-Link Office. If you had no work you stood around hoping that someone would employ you. Idle they may have been but also desperate. These are the people who live from day to day. Who get a bit of work here and a bit of work there. They are the ones who don’t know where their next meal is coming from. Work, for them is not simply an occupation; it is a matter of life and death.

The landowner pays all of them a day’s wage regardless of whether they have worked 3, 6, 9 or 12 hours. At first this seems unfair – and the landowner cops flack because of it. But at another level it is more than fair. At this other level the values of God’s Kingdom make much more sense in their absurdity. Each is paid according to what they need, not according to how much they have done. Each is given a day’s wage. All have enough to feed themselves and their families for a day, enough to pay the rent and enough to keep their dignity.

Of course the story is exaggerated to make its point. But the point is clear: Social Justice is not just a matter of what is fair; in God’s kingdom it is a matter of what is generous.

“Be generous” says the parable: ““Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because *I am* generous?”” (Mtt 20:15-16, NRSV).

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So today’s parable speaks at a number of levels. These levels, of course, are not missed on us. Just as Matthew’s church was made up of human beings so is our

church. We, just like them can fall into the trap of “Conversion Snobbery”, lose heart, or allow fairness to undermine the power of generosity. All of us can be like the early workers and complain about the “Johnny come lateleys”. All of us can lose sight of God’s generosity.

Well, the parable reminds us of these things but in the reminding is the overcoming of them. The parable, in its hearing, jolts us back into kingdom values.

The Lord be with you.

And also with you.