

Sermon to St James' Church, King Street, Sydney

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Rector of St James

Pentecost 16

(a-os25)

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Readings: Exodus 16: 2-15; Psalm 105: 1-6, 37-45;
Philippians 1: 21-30 Matthew 20: 1-16.

“I Wish to Make a Complaint!”

In Gilbert and Sullivan's politically incorrect and rarely performed operetta *Princess Ida*, the Princesses miserable father, King Gama, is held hostage. He is a misanthrope, one who hates humanity in general, and who finds no greater pleasure than pointing out other people's failings while complaining about all the things that are wrong with the world. While he is a captive, he finds it intolerable that he is treated well by his gaoler and others. He then sings a song beginning with the following words:

*“Whene'er I spoke sarcastic joke replete with malice spiteful,
This people mild politely smil'd, and voted me delightful!
Now, when a wight sits up all night ill-natur'd jokes devising,
And all his wiles are met with smiles it's hard, there's no disguising!
Ah! Oh, don't the days seem lank and long
When all goes right and nothing goes wrong,
And isn't your life extremely flat with nothing whatever to grumble at!”*

What has God ever Done for Us?

Grumbling is a persistent human characteristic and is especially displayed in our current narcissistic culture of complaint, but nothing is new. Indeed, such a mood of complaint crops up in the story of the Hebrews escape from slavery in Egypt and their journey to the promised land, as heard in today's Old Testament reading from Exodus.

The passage follows a song of praise to God in thanksgiving for the people's deliverance (similar to today's Psalm) and which describes all the good things that God has done for them – they had been freed from slavery; they had out-run the Egyptian army which had also been destroyed; they passed through the Reed Sea on dry land; and God was leading them to a new and prosperous dwelling place; but nevertheless they grumbled! Apart from all the good things that had happened, they asked “What has God ever done for us?”

Often good news and blessing is followed by unhappiness and complaint; and so it goes on – the people are hungry and God feeds them but eventually they complain and the wheel turns once more.

Their struggle arose from the problem of finding food and water in an unfamiliar place. Yet, this was a moment that led them to an experience of God's providence and another consciousness-changing event that revealed God's care for his people. A challenge for the people was to discover that they were neither in control of their circumstances nor did they have a right to God's providence. It was an act of grace, as it still is with respect to our use of the earth's bounty.

But it was a problem; because God's providence is a reminder that the creation is not ours to plunder, but rather a gift that we never really own. We are called to be stewards or nurturers of the creation rather than its owners or abusers.

The Age of Entitlement

The people of God grumbled about their circumstances and God responded with a generosity beyond their expectations. There is a similar theme in the Gospel parable about the workers in the vineyard.

Thankfully, this is not a story about industrial relations legislation. The parable tells that all the workers received the same standard wage for their toil. Of course, those who worked the longest grumbled because others who worked less hours received the same wage.

The parable is not about wage fairness, but rather is about God's abundance. All receive the fullness of the day's wage in God's kingdom. Salvation is not about time-serving or a reward for merit, but rather is about the quality of relationships and the capacity of God's mercy.

Like God's blessing of the Hebrews in the Exodus, Jesus teaches that the Kingdom of Heaven is a place of abundant blessing for all. It is a gift that we receive when we recognise God's authority and our need to be faithful to God, to each other, and to nature itself.

Nevertheless, as the parable tells, some of the workers grumbled because those who they considered unworthy received the same blessing as those who understood themselves as more righteous than the others. In this instance, the entitlement of the self-righteous was to consider that all others of whom they did not approve were unworthy of the kingdom of God, and therefore did not belong and therefore should be disregarded.

Entitlement, in this instance, is to entertain the damnation of those whom you think are wrong, or of whom you do not approve, or think are not good enough. But God's providence has another story – it is available to all.

Whenever our lives are shaped around the idols of money, status and power, (or, at least, our belief in the lack of it), we will always have something to grumble about if we believe that others are getting a better deal than us. It is part of our human nature, part of our culture that is obsessed with materiality rather than spirituality.

Of course, we understand the parable to be an analogy for salvation, and that it is never too late to be welcomed into the Kingdom of God and receive its benefits. God desires to relate to us and therefore makes every effort to keep the doors open such that the late-comers receive the same reward as those who have been there for the long-haul. There is resonance between this and the Parable of the Prodigal Son in the Gospel of Luke (Luke 15:11–32).

The reality is, however, that while this may be the ideal, the toilers in the vineyard or the older son who stayed with his father when the younger one ran off to enjoy himself will always feel resentful of those who are rewarded without effort. We humans tend to major in indignation rather than grace. So, we are deep down not so keen on the first being last or the last first – remember (in the old days) how people reacted when lining up for a drink at a bar and someone dared to push in at the front?!

The first will be last and the last will be first is a refrain through this section of Matthew's Gospel. The previous passage was about the rich young man who could not give up his possessions to follow Jesus. The passage after the workers in the vineyard is about the mother of James and John who sought special places of honour for her sons in the Kingdom of God – thereby demonstrating for us the eternal sense of entitlement.

The Grace of God

The parable of the vineyard workers is about the grace and providence of God which is to be experienced in abundance. It is therefore difficult to evaluate the parable in terms of procedural fairness because it is actually about God's unconditional love. 'Love is love'; you can't measure it, own it, or control it, it just is there – manifesting itself through relationships.

Like the Hebrews, our task is to seek God's providence and recognise it when it is present. It is also about being respectful of the world and acknowledging how we are blessed in so many ways (including through scientific advancements, a growing desire for justice, and progressive social policies – acknowledging today the Late Ruth Bader Ginsberg) that improves the common good. Perhaps we should likewise be humble and have an open mind to receiving God's blessing of a vaccine for COVID-19.

Perhaps it is unsurprising to note how people want more as soon as they hear of someone else receiving more favourable terms than they have received – this is the age of entitlement. Jesus, however, taught that we should be content with what God has given us and not be jealous when it seems that someone else is getting a better deal.

In the world's eyes, it wasn't fair for the labourers who had worked the whole day to get only as much as those who had worked a couple of hours; but that is the offence and shock of the parable. Parables need that element to get our attention for they are not doctrine but a pique to our assumptions. The story contrasts our worldly politics based on power, status, and wealth with the rule of God, which is based on abundant grace available for all.

Grace is the key to unlocking the Kingdom, and inside we will discover a world of acceptance, equity, integrity, and empowerment; and where people are not victims. So, the first will be last and the last first, for all are welcome equally into God's kingdom (both saint and sinner), an idea that may be both a shock and an offence to those religious 'keepers of the law' who seek to divide the community and exclude some people from God's loving presence.