

Twenty-Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year A

A theme connecting today's readings is that God does not think as we think. God does not necessarily deliver in equal measure as we might expect. The divine way of operating does not conform to human estimates. Isaiah tells us quite simply that God's ways are not our ways and the psalmist sings of God's compassion and generosity that surpass human understanding. Paul declares that for him authentic life is Christ and all he stands for. And in the parable Jesus points to what constitutes generosity that is motivated and supported by insight.

Isaiah 55:6-9 Here is the anonymous prophet of the Babylonian exile, whose works have been added to the prophecies of Isaiah of Jerusalem, telling the exiles of the fabulous benefit they have in being members of a covenant with their God. He urges his people to look for and find God in their lives. His listeners might have thought he was asking the impossible.

The prophet is reinforcing the spiritual notion that God is near to those who suffer and who seek the Lord. This is especially poignant to a people who believed that suffering of any kind was a punishment from God. But this is not always the case, affirms Second Isaiah. Jesus reinforced this notion when he declared that those experiencing wretchedness, depression, mourning, prejudice are not necessarily offside with God. In fact, he called them 'blessed'.

The prophet is saying we can all rely on the extravagance of divine forgiveness and generosity. None should think they are so far gone that God could not forgive them. When you think about it, God has seen it all – human slaughter, genocide, extreme hatred and the worst of human depravity. Divine Goodness doesn't think like us; and isn't that just as well?

The prophet's message, though, is that humans can only access the divine goodwill when they renounce self-serving ways of living and learn God's ways. And these are no more clearly spelt out than in the words of Jesus, who was the ultimate Word of God, the message, the living, breathing medium of divine communication.

Psalms 145 Echoing the sentiments of Second Isaiah the psalmist stresses the nearness of God. It reminds us of the words of Jesus, 'Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you' (Matthew 7:7).

Most English translations describe the Lord as 'kind' and yet the Hebrew *khanoun* primarily means 'gracious'. The person who is prepared to show favour and generosity in a spirit of self-giving and gentleness is gracious. Consideration of the other is a sign of grace.

Compassion is: Your pain in my heart.

The poet praises divine compassion with the words, *the Lord is full of compassion*. The Hebrew for compassion is *rakhmim*, based on the word *rekhem* = womb. So, authentic compassion is womb-like, deep, instinctive, tender. The compassionate one shares the pain of the sufferer. It's a case of, 'your pain in my heart.'

Philippians 1:20-24, 27 Paul wrote this letter to the Christian community in Philippi sometime in the 50s or early 60s of the first century. Philippi was a significant city in the Roman province of Macedonia, now northern Greece. It was founded in 356 BCE by Philip II of Macedon (father of Alexander the Great). Paul was inspired to take the message of Jesus Christ to the small Jewish community in Philippi and he won over some dedicated converts.

As a Roman colony Philippi was like a small piece of Rome in Macedonia. The citizens were proud of their Roman connections, and yet Paul points out in his letter that their real citizenship is in heaven (Phil 3:20). His letter to the church in Philippi shows he had a soft spot for that community because they had supported him from the beginning and had sent him financial assistance when he was in prison (Phil 2:25). He had a warm personal connection with this community that stood by him in difficult times.

Paul is telling us that his life is centred on Christ. He would like to be with Christ, but he realises he has been called to do the missionary work that helps spread the message of Christ to the world. This 'get on with it' attitude is characteristic of Paul's personality and it comes through in his letters. Notice

how the message of Jesus steers him away from self-interest towards generosity and service. Paul's graciousness expresses itself in the service of his communities, putting the benefit of others beyond himself.

His final word here is urging the Philippians to avoid anything in their thoughts or everyday lives that would go against the values put forward by Jesus.

Matthew 20:1-16 This is arguably the most misunderstood parable in the New Testament. It has traditionally been called, 'The Labourers in the Vineyard' and yet it is not really about the workers; it is about the boss who hires them. The parable would be better titled something like, 'The Generous Landowner,' or 'The Gracious employer,' in order to reset the focus on the action of the boss.

The owner goes to the marketplace to hire day labourers. I clearly remember, during my time in Jerusalem, passing just after dawn through a vacant lot a short distance outside the Damascus Gate. There were Palestinian men of all ages standing around in the hope of picking up a day's work. Bosses and managers would drive up in their utes and call for a number of men for a particular job. A wage would be negotiated and the chosen number would get into the back of the ute and head off to a job. Usually, by 9 o'clock all the workers had been hired.

In this parable there were men waiting most of the day for a manager to come by and offer a job. Some English translations have the owner ask the men why they were standing about 'idle'. But, in this context, the Greek *argoi*, while it can mean idle, should be more accurately translated as unemployed/without work. No worker would hang around the marketplace just to be idle. Besides, their reply to the owner is that no one has offered them work. That clearly defines their intention.

At pay time the all-day workers are having a grizzle because the one-hour workers are getting the same pay. Their complaint is that it is not fair. They have worked all day and the others for only one hour. But the owner correctly points out that they agreed on a day's wage, and that's what they're getting. Where's the injustice? We can all hear the but...but...and maybe we tend to agree with them.

The owner asks if the workers have a problem with his generosity. The Greek actually reads, 'Is your eye evil/vicious because I am good?' At the end of the day, literally, the all-day crowd are no worse off. In fact, they are better off, since they are receiving the wage they agreed on.

The owner is convinced that no one should go hungry.

What is not actually spelled out in the owner's generosity to the part-day workers is that every man goes home at the end of the day with enough to feed his family. It's not the one-hour workers' fault that they were not picked up sooner. But now they have enough to survive on.

The owner is making sure that none of his workers goes home disadvantaged. And with that, isn't Jesus strongly driving home the message that God doesn't think like us? Divine generosity doesn't fit into the narrow tit-for-tat pattern of human systems. So much human endeavour is about controlling our earth and finding manipulative shortcuts to achieve mostly immediate goals. Instead, we ought to remind ourselves that we are stewards of the wonderful world we have been gifted with. Consequently, no one should go hungry, and the landowner of today's parable is a model for this goal. He is providing a small contribution to his big-picture outlook.



When you truly care about something you make an effort, not an excuse.

Anon.



Seeking to inspire the staff, the boss had the personnel manager put a sign in the men's washroom directly above the sink. It had one word on it: THINK!

The next day the boss was in the toilet and saw that there was a second sign right under the first. It was just above the soap dispenser. There was one word on it: THOAP!

Artificial Intelligence is no match for Natural Stupidity

Laurie Woods