

Sermon preached at King's College Chapel, Cambridge

January 28th 2018 – Septuagesima / Homelessness Sunday

Matthew 20.1-16

Is thine eye evil, because I am good?

...or, as modern translations have it, *are you envious because I am generous?*

That's more an interpretation of what the original says than a straight translation. Accurate, but lacking the punch of the actual Greek. *Are you giving me the evil eye?* is something we still say.

This is the point of the story of the Labourers in the Vineyard. It's a parable, Jesus' favourite method of getting through to people. We do have to be a bit careful with parables: careful not to *over-interpret* them (by which I mean turn them into complex allegories, where every element has a meaning). Usually there's a main point, a teaching point, if you like; and this emerges from a story which sets the context, the frame of reference.

Here, the context is God's relationship with his people. We get this from the vineyard setting: it's a favourite image in the Old Testament. The relationship of the Jewish people to their land, their Promised Land, is established and made manifest in the planting of vineyards. Vineyards speak of settled occupation, fertile soil, fruitful produce: a produce which crowns table fellowship and ritual meals.

In the prophetic writings the vineyard becomes a symbol of Israel itself, a literary device by which to cast a penetrating eye across the relationship between God and his people. Isaiah spells this out, as though in parentheses:

*The vineyard of the Lord Almighty
is the nation of Israel,
and the people of Judah
are the vines he delighted in. [Isaiah 5.7]*

This is early on in the book of Isaiah, and is part of his excoriation of the behaviour of the Jewish people. He and the other prophets, with the forensic acumen which made them prophets, saw this behaviour as the reason for their apparent abandonment by God to exile in Babylon, slaves in that Trump Tower of the ancient world. We'll come back to what that behaviour looked like shortly: it is not confined to history.

Jesus uses the vineyard motif in quite a few of his parables, and on every occasion his hearers would have got it straight away. Like the prophets of old, whose daring and clear-sightedness reached their divine zenith in him, Jesus exposes the failings of God's chosen people with unsparing clarity. In today's example the failing that yields the parable's main point is envy in the face of the owner's generosity. In the story itself, the workers who have done more than the others get very huffy at everyone being paid the same. Translated into the realities of God's relationship with his people, that means the people who have been in the vineyard longer get very huffy at others coming along later and being treated the same.

In this we see the two registers of classic prophecy. One register is insight into how things are now. These latecomers to the vineyard are those whom Jesus has called in from the ignominy of exclusion and taboo, upsetting the assumed way of doing things (what in the story would be called natural justice, being paid more for doing more). He spells this out shortly afterwards in another vineyard parable, just in case they weren't getting it: *Truly I tell you, the tax-collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of heaven ahead of you.* [Matt

21.31] Religious enthusiasts are easily tempted into moralising exclusivism, and today's Church is not always any better. It's as though we can't forgive God for being so forgiving. We give the evil eye to his generosity.

The other prophetic register is insight into how things will turn out. And so looking ahead, by which I mean after the time of Jesus, it turns out that the workers called to the vineyard will include Gentiles – which is to say, everyone else in the world, not just the Jews. This is why we hear this gospel story in the Epiphany season, that season of revelation after Christmas when we see the reach of Jesus' saving mission being to the whole of humanity.

I mentioned earlier the risk of over-interpreting parables. This usually derives from the worthy desire to milk Jesus' words for every last drop of inspiration and insight. Thus we might be tempted to talk about the implications of today's story for contemporary labour relations. Well, in the face of unfair working conditions (such as the contemporary, mean phenomenon of zero-hour contracts), we might actually be pretty vocal about unfairness. At the same time though, we might pause as Christians when we start making demands for ourselves which smack a bit of envy or self-serving. The application of Jesus' whole teaching and example enables us to navigate our way through this, measuring our own motives against the call to selfless love. One very unwise bit of over-interpretation would be to carry over the transactional character of the hiring of vineyard workers into the response of people to God's invitation. God does not hire us, and we don't bargain with him.

The command to love, selfless love, can certainly move us to be very critical of the real injustice and deprivation which we see around us. If we go back to Isaiah, we soon hear why God was so scandalised by his people that he was set to rip out the vines – that is, see them exiled from the land of Israel:

⁵ *And now I will tell you
what I will do to my vineyard.
I will remove its hedge,
and it shall be devoured;
I will break down its wall,
and it shall be trampled down.
⁶ I will make it a waste;*
...

⁷ *... the LORD of hosts
... expected justice,
but saw bloodshed;
righteousness,
but heard a cry!*

The people who have benefited from God's favour have turned from what is right and just, and that favour is going to be withdrawn.

How might *we* have turned from what is right and just in our own day? One example is suggested by today's designation as Homelessness Sunday. What an indictment of a civilised society it is to see people hunched and huddled under the cashpoints of Cambridge, hoping for a bit of help. Such is the result of our particular attachment to owning our own homes and our peculiar resistance to paying tax (and, of course, demanding the finest public services: greedy hypocrites that we are!)

I saw the consequences of this in my last parish, a bit of London cursed with multiple kinds of deprivation. One of the biggest problems is the cost of accommodation. The inexorable rise in property values, fuelled by that junkie addiction to ownership and fed by the parasitic dealers of the finance markets, has totally skewed the access that people have to living accommodation. This is not helped by the collapse in the provision of proper social housing. This almost always now involves private finance, even if a charitable housing association is

involved, so that the commercial, market value of land and buildings determine the costs. There is virtually no housing which sits outside this commercial structure, which means that less can be built or provided, and this penalises the poorest. At the same time, the squeeze on public expenditure (much of which is thanks to the half-wit greed of the financial markets) means that the safety net is ever smaller, and more tightly held.

This is where a bit of prophetic zeal would not go amiss. This is where we might dare to believe and say that the sort of selfless love to which Jesus calls us makes us want to do something about this. That might at least be giving some help and comfort to those crumpled people in Lion's Yard. It might even be political action. Whatever we do, however feeble or knocked back by the evil eye of the envious and greedy, do it we must: only then are we opening ourselves to be channels, conduits of God's generous goodness.

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