

Sunday, September 20th, 2020

Pentecost 16A: Exodus 16:2-15, Psalm 105:1-6, 37-45, Philippians 1:21-30, Matthew 20: 1-16

Stewardship of Wealth according to 'Fairness' or Need?

Introduction

I began my working life in industrial relations: first with Rio Tinto, then with the trade union movement and finally with the Federal government. It was *this* Gospel reading, and a clergyman's reckless misinterpretation of it, that was the trigger for my beginning theological work at Sydney University. I thought to myself, "If he can't do better than that, then I can". That is how my life in Christian theology and ministry began.

So, what is difficult about this passage? Where are the traps? There are two. The first, is the worst: namely, that Jesus is affirming a deregulated labour market, where the master, the employer, because of his power in the natural order of things, is free to do what he wishes: in short, "he does, because he can". The second trap, involves the over-spiritualization of the reading altogether, where the preacher wants to avoid anything remotely political, and so, falls silent about the context of the reading, opting to talk about the inoffensive generic generosity of God. Neither cuts it, both are inadequate: the first interpretation is plainly wrong, and the second lacks courage. What then is this story, this parable about? In short, it *is* about the Kingdom of God, the rule of God in history and what the social and political arrangements might look like under God.

Let me begin our thinking with a little bit of Australian history. In 1906, Mr. Justice Higgins, magistrate in the Commonwealth Court of Conciliation and Arbitration, and not insignificantly, the son of the Methodist clergyman, the Rev. John Higgins, and his wife, Anne Bournes; handed down a judgment that came to be known as the *Harvester Decision*. In response to the question brought by an employer, Mr. Hugh Victor McKay, one of Australia's largest employers, about what constitutes a fair and reasonable wage, Higgins wrote this:

*The provision for 'fair and reasonable' remuneration... must be meant to secure workers something which they cannot get by the ordinary system of individual bargaining with employers....and I cannot think of any other standard appropriate, than **the normal needs of an average employee**, regarded as a human being in a civilised community.*

In light of that reasoning, a living wage, what came to be known as the basic wage was established in Australia, and was judged to be an amount sufficient to support a wife and three children in "frugal comfort". The principle here: and this is my point, is that a living wage was established to meet *the needs of a family*.

Matthew

Let's now move to the Gospel reading about the workers in the vineyard. Let's first, unpack the main points of the parable, by asking two questions; firstly, concerning the context, and secondly, the issue at hand. Then we shall draw some conclusions.

The Context: This story is set in a typical situation of the ancient middle east. It concerns day labourers or casual labour who hang around the market place seeking work whenever and wherever they can get it. Day labourers have always been exploitable, in large part because there are more hands offering than are demanded. The inequity of supply and demand, in our story, ensured low wages, a reality that masked the real contribution of casual labour in the generation of wealth in the ancient economies, the political economy of the time.

In this story, we are told, the wage was one denarius, which in all likelihood was the most basic minimum living wage: an unliveable wage. Notable in the story is the suggestion, sometimes mentioned, that these men were standing “idle” (*ergon*) or as our translation has it, “standing around all day doing nothing”. This has been interpreted to suggest that they were responsible for their lack of employment. There is no suggestion of that in the reading. To the contrary, the point is that the day labourers had no choice, but to hang around for long periods of time, in the hope of getting work, *any* work, because of structural injustice: there are simply not enough jobs. Finally, the context tells us that the employer returns repeatedly to employ others during the day, and finally pays all the workers *the same wage*, much to the discontent and anger of those who have worked longer.

The Issue: The issue boils down to this: what constitutes just remuneration? Those who have been working all day, who consider they have been short-changed, subscribe to a market view of ‘fairness’. This is that wages are hourly payments and correlate to the time spent and work done, in that time. What is left out of that consideration, is that the wage level is determined only by market forces, not the actual cost of living. And this is the point, made by the master, the employer: namely, that there is a consideration, more important than market ‘fairness’, and that consideration is *need*. Regardless of how long the workers worked, they each have similar needs that include among other things, resourcing their respective families. The issue then, is one of wages that reflect, market ‘fairness’ or wages that reflect human need. Jesus opts for the latter.

The point of this kingdom ethics and the stewardship that follows in terms of distribution of resources, then, is this: we are asked to think differently, to a new way of viewing the value of work, by keeping the *value of the worker central*—even that worker who has only been employed since five in the afternoon. This is what Mr. Justice Higgins recognised in the Harvester Decision through the establishment of the Australian “basic wage”. In his words, “*a wage that meets the normal needs of an average employee, regarded as a human being in a civilised community.*”

Conclusion

Last week we concluded that stewardship has to do with channelling our resources for purposes of life, promoting life amid what for people is little more than a living death. In large part that is what Christian ministry is about: being vehicles of life, of healthy community, which let us face it, governments are less willing to do these days.

Today, we conclude that stewardship is about being people who speak for and work for distributive justice, addressing human need in situations where traditional attitudes and thinking are inadequate.