

Corona Season (20.9.20)
Trinity 15

Jonah 3.10–4 end
Philippians 1.21–end
Matthew 20.1–16

There are two reflections today: first, The Generous God, a sermon on the readings for today, and second, The Spirit of the Laws, an extended comment on the British Government's recent decision to break international law.

THE GENEROUS GOD

One of the common feelings is that life simply isn't fair. Those of us who work hard often don't get the breaks, while others always seem to fall on their feet with absolutely no effort at all. We know that the sun shines on the just and the unjust alike but why are some able to enjoy the sun in exotic lands while the rest of us have to make do with cloudy skies? It's all very well to be told that virtue is its own reward, but it's not always easy to see things that way.

The Pharisees were a group who felt like that. They worked hard for their place in the Kingdom, they kept all the rules, and then this fellow Jesus comes along assuring publicans, prostitutes and foreigners that their sins were forgiven and that they too would have a place in the Kingdom! It simply wasn't fair. Envy poisoned their hearts and everywhere they followed Jesus around murmuring against him. One of the features of the Gospels – which we tend to miss because we read them in bits and pieces – is this constant murmuring campaign against Jesus. He had to deal constantly with those who opposed him. Against their picture of God he offered a different picture of a God who was loving and generous. In his

parables he said, 'Look at the world like this. This is what God is really like.'

One of those wonderful word pictures that he offers is the parable of the workers in the vineyard. Labourers were hired early in the morning. It still happens in the Middle East as it did in Jesus' day. People who look for work gather early in the morning and wait for someone to come and hire them. Some years ago there was a terrible bomb attack in Baghdad that targeted the place where men were waiting to be hired.

It was probably around 6 o'clock in the morning that the owner of the vineyard came to the market and hired men for the day, agreeing with them that he will pay them the usual day's wage. He hires more men as the day progresses, and even in the last hour of the day, between 4 and 5 in the afternoon, the owner goes out and he hires yet more workers. And to them he says, 'Whatever is right I will give you.' At the end of the day the owner pays the men their wages. The last are paid first, not because they are preferred to the first, but simply as a dramatic device to produce an expectation in the audience that those who were hired first will receive more. The climax of the parable is the reversal of that expectation: all receive the same.

The parable is a picture of the Kingdom of Heaven: all are treated equally. (Matthew's comment at the end about the first being last and the last first, does not fit the facts, and actually misses the point of the parable, which is that unlike the situation on earth, in heaven all are equal in the sight of God. Luke places it more appropriately: *Luke 13.30.*)

There is of course astonishment in the crowd. The workers voice their resentment: 'These latecomers don't deserve the same as us.'

It's simply isn't fair.' What does the owner say to that? He tells them that he is not being unfair to them: 'You agreed on the usual wage for the day did you not? Take your pay and go home. I choose to give the last man the same as you. Surely I am free to do what I like with my own money. Why be jealous, because I am generous?' The emphasis in this parable is not on the differential rates of pay but upon the generosity of the landowner. He hadn't behaved unfairly; he hadn't cheated anybody out of what they had agreed; he had simply been generous to the less fortunate.

The message of the parable is plain. The murmurers who opposed Jesus had let their envy blind them to the true nature of God. God is all goodness; his mercy and forgiveness are given generously – and, indeed, don't we all depend on that? If God was cheese-paring with his mercy and forgiveness where would that leave us? We need God's generosity, and if God is generous in one thing he cannot be other than generous in everything. It is only because of God's generous grace that we have the hope of eternal life, just as it was only because of the landowner's generosity that those hired for one hour had enough to live on. The rule in the market place may be that the more you work the more you get, but that's not the rule for God's kingdom, where God's grace is given according to need, not merit.

So what do we learn from this parable? We learn of course that God is all goodness and ever-generous. We learn too, that God looks first to need, not merit, and that he is equally generous those whom we regard as less deserving. And we learn also not to let envy poison our hearts. But more than this, we need to learn to let the choices of God determine our own choices. We need to let his values

become our values. We need to let his outlook on the world become our outlook on the world.

It was this lesson that Jonah had to learn. He regarded the people of Nineveh as beyond the pale; they deserved to be punished for their sins, but God relented when he saw their repentance. It was just too much for Jonah, and he went away to nurse his anger. But God turned him around; if Jonah – or anyone else – is going to do God's work, then he needs to see the world as God sees it.

As St. Paul said in his Letter to the Philippians, 'Live a life worthy of the Gospel of Christ.' A life which is worthy of the Gospel of Christ is one in which we allow Christ to work within us, to conform our values and our outlook and our way of being to the ways of God. It might not always be convenient, and it will hold some of our human ways up to judgement, but it is the choice of God that is primary and is not to be argued with. At the end of the day, there is no arguing with God about what he will do with his mercy and forgiveness, and if he chooses to be generous then we should rejoice. This, after all, is the foundation of our own faith. Writing to the Romans, Paul reminded them of this: 'Is God to be charged with injustice? Certainly not. He says to Moses, "I will show mercy to whom I will show mercy and have pity on whom I will have pity."' (*Romans 9.14*) We are not to bargain with the choices of God. We are to conform our lives to them.

This is a hard lesson. It was hard for the Pharisees whose religion was founded on the keeping of the rules, and who looked down upon those who did not. They had kept the law in full – as they would see it, they had borne the heat and burden of the day – and they expected a greater eternal reward than the rest. They could not understand that those who did not keep the rules would be equally

well treated by God (so long as they repented), and they could not understand Jesus' fellowship with sinners. But that is the choice of God.

Perhaps the hardest thing for us to grasp is the very different values of the Kingdom to those we generally live by. We pray, 'Thy kingdom come on earth as in heaven,' but we act as though it's the other way round, that what we do on earth is how it will be in heaven. The parable is not, of course, offering a wages policy, but it does point to the deficiency of our modern economy. How different and how fairer things would be if people received according to need, and were motivated by serving the common good rather than simply by personal gain.

But I think there is a deeper message about how our economic culture diminishes us as people that we need to take to heart. However much we acquire, at the end of our lives all we take with us is ourselves – not our possessions and our treasures; not the money we have saved and invested; not our achievements and our status, but our self and our spirit. The person we have become is all that we have to offer when we face God in the courts of heaven.

Jesus said, 'What does anyone gain by winning the whole world at the cost of his true self?' The Pharisees looked for security in a code of laws. We are told these days that security lies in wealth and possessions, being properly insured and so on. And obviously at one level this is true. But the security that lasts for ever, the security of being close to God, is not to be found in a code, nor is it to be found in wealth and possessions, but in a relationship: first with God, and then with the community. Jesus said he was the true and living way to such a secure relationship, and it is in developing and deepening that relationship, coming to see the world as God sees it,

and opening our arms and our hearts to his generosity, that we shall find our true security – not in ideas of fairness based upon considerations of self-concern. If we fail to see this then we are as guilty as the Pharisees of being hard-hearted.

We all depend on God's mercy. Rejoice that he is generous. Don't be resentful because God is generous. Rejoice in his generosity because we are all going to need it. The sun may shine on the just and the unjust alike, but rejoice; it shines on you!

To God be the glory now and for ever. Amen.

THE SPIRIT OF THE LAWS

Should Christians be concerned about the Bill going through Parliament that seeks to change unilaterally an aspect of an international treaty that the UK Government negotiated, agreed and signed, where the effect of the change will be to break international law? I think that this should be of prime concern to Christians, as it should be to anyone who believes in the Rule of Law.

I quote above from St Paul's letter to the Philippians where he urges them to let their conduct be worthy of the gospel of Christ (*Philippians 1.27*). One of the hallmarks of Jesus' teaching, central to the gospel, is that the spirit is primary; the way we do things is just as important, if not more so, than deed itself. This teaching is seen particularly in the New Law given in the Sermon on the Mount, for example:

You have heard that they were told, 'Do not commit adultery.'
But what I tell you is this: If a man looks at a woman with a
lustful eye, he has already committed adultery with her in
his heart. (*Matthew 5.27–28*)

Or, in another vein:

Be careful not to parade your religion before others... When
you give alms, do not announce it with a flourish of trumpets
as the hypocrites do... When you give alms do not let your left
hand know what your right is doing; your good deed must be
secret... (*Matthew 6.1–4*)

In public life the way that we do things is no less important than
in our private life; morality is one: what we do in the market place is
governed by the same values as what we do in the holy place. And
one of those values is a concern to act in the right spirit.

In the 18th century, the French jurist Montesquieu wrote about the
application of this principle in public life in terms that speak to us
today. He said that if a society is to be just the laws have to be
applied according to their spirit and not simply according to their
letter; in other words the rules have to be applied with morality and
righteousness, which are prior to law. In his book, *The Spirit of Laws*,
he makes a basic distinction between the nature of government and
the principle of government, that is, between the way in which a
government is constituted (its particular structure), and the way in
which it is made to act, the human passions which set it in motion,
which he calls the 'spring'. In a democracy, he says, that spring is
virtue, the quality which ensures that those who make the laws
accept that they also are subject to them, and which, in turn, implies
a willingness to put the interests of the community ahead of purely

private interests. In the present context that means placing the need for international order above purely national interests.

While Montesquieu's approach was secular rather than religious, his notion of virtue is essential to the proper and fair exercise of power. As he said, 'When virtue is banished, ambition invades the minds of those who are disposed to receive it, and avarice invades the whole community.' And this is precisely what we saw, for example, in the banking crisis, in the abuse of Parliamentary expenses by many MPs, in the miss-selling of insurance, in the way multinationals avoid paying a fair share of tax, and, most serious of all, in the way democracy is subverted through what has been described as 'the erosion of norms' – the unspoken rules and conventions that transcend political differences and ensure that power will be exercised according to accepted standards. The deliberate decision to act not merely in breach of the spirit of the law, but in breach of the letter of the law shows how far the norms have been eroded. And there seems to be no concern that it diminishes our moral standing in the world and that it sets an appalling example – and at a time of unprecedented peace-time restrictions when it's vital that we obey the rules for the common good. We can't simply ignore the law when we find it inconvenient.

The way a certain style of political leadership is prepared to sit light to virtue and ride roughshod over accepted norms, changing laws to suit its convenience, should alarm us. It is the subject of a recent book, *How Democracies Die*, by two American scholars, Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt (Viking, 2018). The two primary norms they think underpin democracy are 'mutual toleration' and 'institutional forbearance', variations on the same theme. Contemporary examples of the way these norms are being eroded include gratuitously insulting opponents and questioning their motives; the unprincipled and clandestine use of social media to

influence elections; cynical stratagems like the unlawful prorogation of Parliament in 2019, and those employed by authoritarian rulers to extend their power, for example, the way in which Vladimir Putin swapped the roles of president and prime minister in order to avoid the limit on the number of terms that the Russian president can serve (and now, of course, the way he, and others like President Xi Jinping of China, have engineered the abolition of term limits enabling them to extend their power indefinitely).

The spirit of the law and virtue are both vulnerable things, all too easily eclipsed by selfish or short-term desires. Not surprisingly, we do not hear much about virtue today; we hear more about values, but virtue is prior to values: it is an inner quality, a fountain of grace, that enables us to live a life that is morally good. One of the things that fights against virtue is the debasement of morality and its replacement by rules, prescribed procedures and corporate codes of ethics. The problem is that rules, procedures and codes cannot reflect the true nature of ethics, namely a form of self-obligation by which we autonomously impose a norm on ourselves. Most modern crises, like the banking crisis in 2008, demonstrate this. It was not so much the law that was inadequate but the people who applied it; both bankers and regulators were too much concerned with the letter of the law rather than its spirit – with finding ways round the rules that enabled them to maximise profits rather than to do what was right. We needed morally more adequate bankers and regulators, and in the same way right now we need a more morally adequate politics – and more morally adequate leaders.

Alasdair MacIntyre, in his celebrated book *After Virtue*, describes the time when the Roman Empire was declining into the Dark Ages. He argues that a crucial turning point in that earlier history occurred when men and women of goodwill turned aside from shoring up Roman power because they realised that the

continuation of civility and moral community was not to be equated with the maintenance of the power and structures that made up the Roman establishment. 'What they set themselves to achieve instead,' he says, 'was the construction of new forms of community within which the moral life could be sustained so that both morality and civility might survive the coming ages of barbarism and darkness.' (*After Virtue*, p. 263) Those Ages were dark in large measure because the barbarian conquerors who took over the Roman forms of government lacked the civic and moral virtues that were essential to their proper functioning. The parallels with modern times are disturbing. Macintyre wrote in 1981, and he believed then that the modern successors of the barbarians had been governing us for some time. Recent events give no grounds for believing that things have improved.

Through the Dark Ages the Church, and particularly its monastic communities, were instrumental in keeping alive the Christian virtues and values that underlie civilised government. Today, it has the same task. If our conduct is going to be worthy of the gospel of Christ, then it has to be shaped by Christian virtue. Virtue is the light of Christ within, the agent of inner change and growth. Virtue shapes conscience, our personal self-regulator that enables us to listen to voices beyond our own feelings and desires, something that is gradually being drained out of our politics. The pursuit of virtue gives us the inner strength to live by higher values, qualities and standards (particularly those that are altruistic), than those that simply serve our self-interest. Today we think of values as personally chosen, part of our life style. Virtue is in a different category; it is something given, and it is not concerned so much with life style as with life-giving style. The source of virtue is the love and grace that come from God, and we see this in the New Law that Jesus gave in which substance triumphs over form, the spirit

over the letter. As St John said, the spirit completes the law: 'The law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.' (*John 1.17*) Law gives shape to society; the Spirit gives it life.

Note:

*I consider further the relation between law and spirit in my book *Light in the Darkness: Exploring the Christian Path of Hope* (Sacristy Press, 2020), chapter 2.*