

**14th Sunday After Pentecost – St Paul’s Manuka – 24 September,
2017 – Preacher: The Venerable Dr Brian Douglas**

Exodus 16: 2-15

Psalms 105: 1-6, 37-45

Philippians 1: 21-30

Matthew 20: 1-16

Today’s gospel tells us the story of a landowner who hires workers at five different times during the day. When evening came he paid all the workers a day’s wage, even though some of them had worked all day while others had worked only a few hours. On the surface this seems so unfair and perhaps a job for the Fair Work Commission. They all went seeking employment and some began to work well before others. They all had families to feed. Those who had waited for most of the day would be wondering whether they would have enough money to buy food for their families. But then by the end of the day they had all been hired and those hired late in the day must have thought to themselves: “Well at least I’ll get something for the work I’ve done. Maybe it will be enough to buy food for the table tonight”.

At the end of the day a queue formed at the landowner’s office. The ones who had begun work last were paid first and the ones who began work early in the day stood, tired and watching. Then to their great surprise the last were paid the same as the first. The word was passed along the line: “He’s paying them the same as us. We will surely get more pay than them”. Put yourself in the place of the ones at the end of the queue. Maybe you can understand how they expected to get more and maybe you can feel their disappointment and indignation when they did not.

A few years ago I almost saw this parable acted out in Fiji. I was there with a group of students from the school where I was chaplain. We were living and working in an Anglican orphanage in Suva – now interestingly the place where Fr Alipate’s sister, Sister Carlo, is in charge. It was a long way from the tourist resorts and pleasures. One day as we walked through the shanty town near the orphanage I saw a group of men at the crossroads. Some of them were lying there. But you couldn’t blame them with the sun blazing down on them. Some of them were standing. No doubt they figured they a better chance of being hired that way.

What were they doing there I thought? They were engaged in that most humbling of occupations – waiting. They were waiting for some farmer or builder to come along and hire them for the day. Some had been there

since sunrise. Indeed I was told that some of them had been there overnight. And still you will find people who say that these people do not want to work.

They were totally exposed. They were on view, on display. Many eyes scanned them – indifferent eyes, curious eyes, even hostile eyes and then my first world eyes. Their value depended on what people wanted from them. They seemed to have no value in themselves. They would work for almost any wage – whatever the hirer is ready to pay. It was already 10 o'clock in the morning. A look of dejection was beginning to settle on their faces. The day was wearing on. Hope was fading.

As I looked at these men on a Fiji street and thought about this very parable from the 20th chapter of Matthew's Gospel I realised that this hopeless scene was where the similarity with parable ended. For most of these men there would be no happy ending like the parable. There would be no eleventh hour reprieve with the same wage as all the others. They would go home to their houses and families empty-handed and perhaps there would be no food on the table tonight.

In this world it seems the first shall be first, and the last will be last. This is not the way of the kingdom of God where Jesus tells us that the last will be first and the first will be last. Jesus has a pretty radical way of looking at and organising the world, but perhaps that radical agenda is needed.

In this world the strong have the victory and the powerful expect the reward. Those with much expect more, and those who have little, often receive very little. In this world many are hungry, many are cold, many have no opportunities and no options. Just think of those in Syria or in Myanmar. In this world 20% of the people own and use 80% of the resources and 80% of the people have access to only 20% of the resources. It's too simplistic to say that it's all their fault. It's too easy to say that they could fix it if they just worked harder since it is the world economic order, with all its power, that works against them. Try telling an aids orphan or someone fleeing oppression as a refugee that all they have to do is work harder. Try telling a person deprived of their freedom and locked up in some awful hell hole of gaol that they can exercise their freedom as a right or they can do anything they want if they put their mind to it. Try explaining to a second or third generation of the unemployed that all they have to do is work harder. It's really not that simple.

In our world it's too easy to accept things the way they are - especially if you are rich, or powerful or comfortable.

In the kingdom of God things are much different. In the kingdom of God we must let God be God. In the kingdom of God we must let God make the decisions about how things are going to be. What seems certain is that in the kingdom of God things will not happen in the same way as they are in the earthly kingdom. This surely is the point of the parable – the economics of the kingdom of God, not the economics of this world.

Jesus' teachings about the kingdom of God change the established order and spring surprises on us. Some would want to argue that the ways of God are unjust. The ways of God are not unjust, just extraordinarily generous. God gives in ways we don't expect and in ways that don't follow earthly rules and regulations.

As we live in the world we have the chance though to experience more and more of the kingdom of God as God's light and ways are revealed among us. The kingdom of God is here - not in completeness, but nonetheless here. Those of us who try to live as Christians, as followers of Jesus Christ, need to recognise that as God's kingdom of heaven irrupts more and more in our lives and the lives of other people, then the way of the earthly world will sometimes be in opposition to the ways of God's kingdom.

If we think in this way it may help us to understand more and more about God's ways, to tolerate some of the tensions between our way and God's way, and most importantly it may help us to do something which will help to promote the values of the kingdom of God in our own lives and the lives of other people.

Each of us can, if we want to, and if we allow God to work in and through us, do something, no matter how small, to make the kingdom of God more alive in the kingdom of the earth. A kind word, a generous act, an acceptance of others who are different and a toleration of the inconsistencies. All these can help. A desire to live more simply and more justly with others. A seeking after peace and reconciliation. A caring for the environment and a seeking after justice. A desire to share and a willingness to give - all these are part of the kingdom of God, here on earth.

We can all pray for those who do not have our power or riches. We can also pray that we may have the grace to share the things that God has given us with the rest of God's creation.

In the kingdom of God irrupting amongst us there are no special rights for those who have been here the longest – even those who have been in the church the longest. All are equal in the eyes of God. It is people who make the distinctions not God.