

**Pentecost 18**  
**18/9/2005**

**Mark the Evangelist**

**Exodus 16:2-15**  
**Psalm 105: 1-6, 35-47**  
**Phil 1:21-30**  
**Matthew 20:1-16**

### **The No and Yes of God**

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During the Depression Australia suffered severe unemployment. Out of a population of 6.5 million, 700, 000 were jobless - more than 10%. Only Germany, struggling under the burden of post war reparations, was worse off. At this time Australia owed Britain huge amounts of money on loans. Some had funded public works like railways. And some had funded the equipping and transport of soldiers to the killing fields of Gallipoli and Europe. The annual interest payment on these loans was equivalent to \$2.5 billion, and to meet them, social service payments were cut. Britain also had large War Loans with the American money market. However the interest rates on these had been renegotiated. No such concession was offered to Australia, which continued to pay premium rates in a deflated market. At a Premiers' Conference in 1931, the Premier of NSW, Jack Lang, proposed that Australia withhold further loan payments to Britain until the interest rate was renegotiated. If ordinary workers and war pensioners were having to suffer, those at the other end of the scale should also be asked to bear some of the burden. Lang's idea struck like a thunderbolt. It was regarded as an unthinkable solution, far outside the normal parameters of running the world. Premiers dissociated themselves from Lang. One speaker drew loud applause when he said, "If Australia is to surmount her troubles by the abandonment of traditional standards of honesty, justice and fair play, it would be far better for Australia that every citizen within her bounds should die of starvation during the next few months." The speaker was a rising politician, Robert Menzies. Lang's proposal inevitably led to his political demise. However, not long after that some of the measures he sought were implemented by his opponents.

The parable of the labourers in the vineyard is a startling tale, which is told to help us understand that how we stand with God is not based on any form of normal worldly calculations. When the vintage was ready the landowner searched for workers and struck a deal based on the going rate. When more workers joined, payment was mentioned, but the going rate was not. At the end of the day those who signed on last were paid first, to reveal that all had received the same amount. There was no injustice towards those who were called first. No one had been denied, or cheated or received less than agreed. What seemed unfair was that others had worked fewer hours for the same pay. The first to commence work grumbled. Seeing what happened to those who came last, they expected a bonus. By normal standards they may have had a case, but the reign of God is not administered according to normal human standards.

The parable offers us a NO and a YES. The NO comes from seeing that life in the reign of God cannot be calculated according to normal human standards. Our natural mode is to think of this in terms of what is deserved. Our usual measures relate to effort, supported by the rules of industrial relations, financial equity or legal obligation. If we are wedded to this mode, we will find ourselves totally undercut by this story - for all were treated the same, a principle Jack Lang's plan tried to implement in a different

way.

But in particular this parable challenges those who are pleased with their efforts in religion. The Gospels show that the righteous are frequently those who refuse to live joyfully in the freedom of God's acceptance. They are instead accompanied by a deep cloud of gloom. In context Matthew would have been challenging those who, on the basis of religious rules and practices, believed they deserved more. The grumblers in the parable may have been the same as those who murmured at Jesus eating with sinners, or were indignant at his forgiving the sins of the sick. Or those who offered joyless, self-promoting prayers, while complaining that Jesus seemed a glutton and a wine drinker. The Landowner's question - "Are you envious because I am generous?" - uncovers the deeper meaning here.

Where religious life is measured according to ordinary methods of achievement, the besetting sin becomes hostility towards grace. Grace stands for a form of generosity that brings to nothing all our calculations of merit. There is a connection between the parable and the Exodus reading for there we find Israel grumbling in their freedom. They are finding it hard to live according to the daily provision of God's generosity. They may even have preferred the days of slavery. But God is still for them, and in the wilderness they continue to live so long as they look towards God.

The interesting thing is that the NO which cuts at our normal approach to life is really based on a deep YES. The YES comes from the invitation to serve, which is offered to all, even to the end of the day. The YES is found in the gracious payment given, regardless of the time spent in service. The YES is in the Landowner who continues to seek labourers for the vineyard. The Good News here is that in the market place of life God seeks us out. God invites us, even at the close of the day. This invitation is based on nothing to do with status, or talent, or the vanity that might accrue from superior performance. In the reign of God we do not have to build a credit rating, or gather enough frequent flyer points. In worldly terms we can be nothing, but God invites us. There is no bigger YES we can have than this, and by their yes to this YES the most lowly may discover they have a place among the first.

The risk of reading this story and the Exodus together is that we can focus on grumbling. Grumbling is topical. With the release of the Latham diaries we have been subject to an awful lot of grumbling. Such is the power of grumbling we will live with its fallout for a long time. Julia Gillard commented that Mark Latham's grumbling was due to his loss of faith in the Labor Party. Loss of faith is the root of grumbling in Exodus, and in the Parable. As Exodus shows, grumblers have been around a long time. What they teach us is that it is difficult to live in the gracious care of God. We are not so used to taking each day as it comes, and trusting that we have already been set free. It is hard to believe there will be enough for us each day.

I mention this because living towards the reign of God involves realising there is a NO and the YES. It means seeing that all our ideas of success have to be put aside. If for some this becomes a source of great gloom we can only say the true state of things is revealed, for where your treasure is there will your heart be also. What makes it possible to embrace the NO and move on, is that the YES is the stronger, and it is not in our hands. And the YES is an invitation to joyful living that is free because it is no longer constrained by what humans think. It knows there is a much deeper affirmation than that - the YES of God, who continues to seek us, in the market place of life, and call us to serve.

There were two editions of "Enough Rope" this week. The first was an interview with

Jane Fonda whose life has been filled with fame, achievement, and deep sadness. She revealed how hard she had to work to overcome early damage, a difficult relationship with her father, loss of self-esteem and a pervasive sense of emptiness that drove her career, and her relationships. Her last husband came from Georgia, where people went to church. This practice had not been part of her life, but she said how, as she began to attend, a sense of reverence grew within her. In the end she said she had a somatic response. The deepening sense of reverence grew, to the point where she came to faith in Christ. Her inner emptiness began to fill, but not because of her.

In the market place of life, God seeks us, and God invites us. This is the YES in which we live. Thanks be to God.