

Pentecost 20
18/09/2011

Mark the Evangelist

Exodus 16:2- 15

Psalms 105

Philippians 1:21 - 30

Matthew 20:1 - 16

Sermon preached by Rev. Rob Gallacher

Read Authorized version vv. 13-16a noting 400th anniversary of the King James bible, and a personal note that I am reading from my father's desk bible, given him by his parents when 16.

“But he answered one of them, and said, Friend, I do thee no wrong: didst not thou agree with me for a penny? Take that thine is, and go thy way: I will give unto this last, even as unto thee. Is it not lawful for me to do what I will with mine own? Is thine eye evil, because I am good? So the last shall be first, and the first last.”

Parables are sometimes called time bombs. They tick away for some time, and then suddenly explode with unexpected meaning. In this instance the explosion is of nuclear proportions.

Jesus knew that, or at least Matthew did, for he bookends the parable between two sayings. The last verse of chapter 19 reads, “The first shall be last”, That's not too bad, there's an element of “Serves them right” about that, and the disciples are comforted by it. But at the other end of the parable Jesus puts the emphasis on the other part, “The last shall be first”. Now that is harder to take. It means that instead of those who are ahead of them going behind them, now those who are behind them get ahead of them.

The parable illustrates that, but it is a shock. Ann and Mary tell me that they told this story to the children last Sunday, and the children could hardly wait to the end before they burst out with “That's not fair!”. That's the normal reaction. That's before the bomb starts ticking.

Let's work through it, looking at it from the aspect of each participant in turn. First, the Landowner. He is presented as a benefactor, a philanthropist even. From his largesse he hands out money on the basis of need rather than merit. Nineteenth century industrialist and bankers like Carnegie and Rockefeller did great things with their wealth, Nicholas, Ormond and Cato too, to bring it closer to home. But when I was studying social psychology, last millennium, philanthropy was a dirty word. There was no planning, the good works were haphazard, chosen on sentiment and performed by amateurs, like Kerry Packer fitting out all ambulances with a special heart machine because his life was saved by one. No, tax the rich, set up the welfare state and let the professionals deliver the services.

I'm not going to take that debate any further here. Except to say I am thankful for both. The explosion is at another level.

Second, look at the labourers who worked all day. They thought they would get more. But they are told, a day's wage for a day's work is enough. "Enough". That's counter culture for you. We don't live in a world where people say "That's enough". Can't you here the economists cry out, "Enough? People will stop consuming. Sales will go down, there will be a glut in production, workers will be sacked. No. The word is 'More'". The Union leaders cry, "Enough? After all we have done to get living standards up to the highest in the world, you can't expect us to stop our demands now!" And the mining magnates say, "Enough? If every profit report is not a new record our industry will collapse." And us retirees say, "Enough? But we have to manage inflation, illness and might have to go into care."

If you want it put a little more elegantly, I give you the words of Mvume Dandala, now retired secretary of the All African Council of Churches when addressing the World Methodist Council last week, "**The illness is in a world where violence is often being embraced as the sole solution to political differences... a world where the gap between rich and poor is inextricably getting wider... a world where exploitation of the environment continues unabated because it benefits some.... When diseases like HIV/AIDS decimate entire populations while pharmaceuticals see this first as an opportunity for expanding markets.**" Then he issued the challenge. The church should reclaim its position as moral compass.

The labourers are told "You received what we agreed on". If the socio-economic philosophical and religious explosion in that innocent remark is not enough, look at the inner turmoil created by the next bit. "Are you envious because I am generous?" That's an awful translation. It's not even the original Greek. *Hey ophthalmos sou pongeros estin* Is your eye (*ophthalmos*) evil (*pongeros*) -- Matthew is keen on that word. It turns up in a lot of places, like the Lord's Prayer "**Deliver us from evil**" Here the RSV does better: "**rescue us from the evil one**". Then 10 verses later, "**If your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light, but if your eye is pongeros, evil...**" "or even better "**if your eye is the evil one, your whole body will be full of darkness**".

We were having one of those tension ridden, theologically dubious exercises called a Stewardship Campaign. I was taken aback when the director asked me – me, the underpaid parson - to witness my pledge. I took a look at the recorder's book and my evil eye perceived that these captains of industry and school principals were a pretty mean lot. I expressed my observation to a layman, one whom I knew was generous, and quick as a flash he said "When you give you don't look over your shoulder at what others are giving". He had taught me a very valuable lesson. Giving or receiving, don't compare yourself with others.

Is your eye the evil one **because I am generous?** - Oh dear! The word is *agathos* – "good" as the AV has it. Well 'generous' is given in the lectionary, but in this context it takes the teeth from the saying. **Upright, virtuous** are also given. Something of a moral challenge to the selfish social order is indicated. A nice word like "generous" doesn't do it. **Do you see something evil in me because I am stepping out of line to relieve poverty?** Or, AV - "**Is thine eye evil because I am good?**" Become the moral compass

Third, the labourers who came later but received the same. Here is the connection with Exodus, and the gracious gift of manna. These people had not been able to find other work that day, so if they were paid for one hour only they would have to feed the family on only one tenth of denarius, inadequate, though my arithmetic makes that still 5 times more than a third of the world's population receives today. The fleeing Hebrews didn't even have that much. But they were very thankful for the manna, and, later, even more thankful for their deliverance from slavery. So much so that the Passover, with its unleavened bread, became the major festival, and morphed into the Christian breaking of the bread in the Eucharist - which means thanksgiving. I am grateful to Rohan Williams who lectured once on "Living Eucharistically". The sacrament is the focus for living in a state of thanksgiving. It frees you from slavery to greed, consumerism and soul destroying comparisons with others. It turns the social order upside down. It is the life of the Kingdom of Heaven, the purpose of the parable. Be satisfied with enough and give thanks. So the last, i.e. the thankful and the humble, shall be first. They belong to the kingdom

If you travel the Camino, the pilgrim route to Santiago de Compostella in Spain, you will come across Domingo. In the 11th century he was an earnest young man who wanted to become a monk. But he wasn't very bright. Time and again he presented himself to a monastery, but he was rejected every time. He noticed that a part of the road the pilgrim's travelled was very difficult, so he set about improving it. Then he came to a stream and he put in a causeway. Next he built a whole bridge and then a refuge, and he spent his life caring for the pilgrims. He was duly canonised, while those superior monks, who judged him unfit, have disappeared into oblivion. Saint Domingo is remembered every 12th May as the patron saint of road builders. **Closer to home**, I have read two books recently, about people who came to Australia with nothing and who are extremely thankful. Anh Dho, one of the boat people from Vietnam has written "The Happiest Refugee". Najaf Mazari from Afghanistan has written The Rug Maker of Mazar-e-Sharif. His shop is in Commercial Road if you want a rug. **Now**, look at our hymns today. John Milton, enduring the English civil war and himself going blind, wrote "Let us with a gladsome mind praise the Lord for he is kind" Martin Rinkhart, pastor during the black death was burying parishioners in mass graves, among them his own wife, and he came up with, "Now thank we all our God, who wondrous things hath done." The one John wouldn't let me have comes from John Bunyan. Incarcerated in Bedford gaol for illegal preaching, he wrote Pilgrim's Progress. In the Valley of Humiliation he has a poor shepherd boy sing: "He that is down needs fear no fall". The second verse goes: "I am content with what I have, little be it or much, And, Lord, contentment still I crave, because thou savest such." And Psalm 105: "O give thanks to the Lord, call upon his name, make known his deeds among the people." Amongst everything else, give thanks for our heritage.
