

Pentecost 16 20th Sept 2020

Matthew 20:1-16

Contemplatio: Michael Wood

My work during the week puts me into contact with a lot of people for whom the idea of success and personal achievement is central to life. As a Chaplain in a university I'm surrounded by intelligent men and women who have largely been told that they can achieve whatever they want in life – and they probably can. Study hard and get a good job is the current horizon for many of their lives. They, just like me, got into university in the first place on the back of working hard and achieving good results. And they, like most people, believe that getting a good job will be dependent on getting good results.

This is not in any way a criticism – it is simple reflecting something about the world works – or at least the world of what St Paul called 'flesh'....by which he meant the kind of predominant operating systems of comparison, competition and rivalry.

Many people, at least where I work and I think it's true in many areas of our lives, have a very highly attuned sense of comparison – one with another. If, for example, one of **them** were to get into a job and I didn't believe they had worked hard enough for it, or perhaps I thought that I should have got the job instead of them, then I might feel outraged. Our world is an economy built on **meritocracy** in which, it is believed, we should get what we deserve.

In fact a formal prime minister of Australia, Keven Rudd, a Queensland Anglican once said in a TV interview – 'I believe in meritocracy' – which might make for good politics but it's lousy Christian theology. For in the divine economy of grace, we don't get what we deserve – we get something much better, - the *unmerited* grace of God which does not depend on our effort or achievement. In the parable of the workers in the vineyard, people who come in late in the day, having only worked for a couple of hours get given the same payment as those who have worked in the hot sun for 8 hours. Bugger!

So God is not really into weighing up our achievements, despite all that ridiculous movie mythology of St Peter standing at the pearly gate with a clipboard in hand. God is most certainly NOT a Santa who is 'making a list, checking in twice, trying to find out who's naughty and nice'. Unmerited grace may annoy us when we see it given to another person, but perhaps if we contemplated ourselves as recipients of that same grace, it might soften our hearts and make us graceful people.

I will finish with a little meditation from an American Anglican Priest, Suzanne Guthrie, from her website. She tells the story of a grumpy old bloke who she had some association with and ultimately presided at his funeral. The story speaks to today's gospel reading.

"Peter was a low-down, goddamn, selfish son-of-a-bitch." The congregation sucked all the air out the church. Then, a titter. Then an out- breath of relief. Then laughter. I was telling the truth.

"Peter said, 'You'll get me into that church over my dead body!' Well, we had a nice party in the narthex last night around your coffin, Peter! And we laughed a lot!" Thus began the funeral homily for Peter.

Peter was so mean he was cute.

When I first met him, he was smashing a low brick wall in front of the cottage he shared with his wife Sheila. "Oh, he knocks it down and then he builds it up. It's how he deals with his anger," said Sheila.

Peter and Sheila had AIDS.

One of the several times we thought he was dying, Peter rallied enough to chase away the priest Sheila had summoned. But I often came to sit with him, although I knew enough not to pray with him. Once, when I thought he was unconscious, Peter suddenly responded to a TV news report highlighting [a person for whom he had particularly low regard]. Grasping his oxygen mask and tearing it off his face Peter barked, "That guy's full of shit!" then replaced the mask and went out cold.

Peter and Sheila fought often. But Sheila counted out his pills, never-mind that Peter often stole and abused them behind her back. He was a drug addict, after-all. He was angry with the world. Angry that he was dying. Angry with everyone. He was a genius at anger. And swearing.

But Peter got to see heaven. One day, the space beyond the television, beyond the wall and ceiling, opened into a billowing heaven. He saw dead relatives. He saw angels. Peter described in detail to his family what he was seeing. In the next death crises, Peter allowed the priest he'd previously thrown out to hear his confession. And Peter died in peace, having seen heaven in the eleventh hour.

Some of us, who've worked in the vineyard of the Lord all our lives, have never seen heaven. Not once.

Sheila and I chose the parable of the workers in the vineyard for Peter's funeral. And whenever I hear it I think of mean, goddamn, difficult, selfish, son-of-a-bitch Peter, seeing heaven at the eleventh hour.

[Jesus framed it like this] - *'are you envious because I am generous?' So the last will be first, and the first will be last.* -Matthew 20:16

<http://edgeofenclosure.org/proper20a.html>