

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon – 15th Sunday after Trinity – 20th September 2020

Reflection

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One of the knock-on effects of the health restrictions announced last week in the chaplaincy area was the cancellation of the *Foire Internationale de Marseille*, the annual exhibition and trade fair usually attended by some 300,000 people. The city authorities were understandably keen that it should go ahead, since the *Foire* is a significant source of income each year, but it was not to be.

Trade fairs, and the consumer industry in general, are about making people want things that they don't already have. The French writer and thinker René Girard, who died a few years ago, believed that desire (one of the deepest human motivators) is mimetic – in other words, our desires are borrowed from other people. 'I want one like theirs.' It is why fashion houses hire beautiful people to model their clothes – we want to look like the models, the models wear the clothes, so we buy the clothes.

What does this have to do with today's Gospel? Well, Girard had something important to say about the cry known to every parent of young children: 'It's not *fair*.' Children have a strong sense of what is fair and what is not. The cry 'it's not fair' is equally well known to human resources managers and politicians when those children - that's us – have grown into adults, still with our sense of

outrage that another person has more than we have. It runs deep in human behaviour.

I suspect I am not alone in finding the parable of the workers in the vineyard slightly uncomfortable. It's the same sort of discomfort that I feel at the end of the parable of the prodigal son, when the one who has stayed at home being conscientious watches as the wayward one is not only forgiven but given a party. There is a bit in me that identifies too easily with the workers who have toiled all day and think they should get something more as a result. The human resources managers I mentioned earlier are adept at harnessing our human perceptions of what is 'fair' in the name of those twin gods of the market economy: productivity and performance.

What Girard maintained about the cry 'it's not *fair*' was that all conflict originates in mimetic desire, because it turns to mimetic rivalry – 'I want one like theirs' becomes 'I want the one they've got' – and that such rivalry, unless it is stemmed, becomes a source of violence in our world. In our readings from Genesis over the summer we noted the number of sibling rivalries which it contains, and how corrosive they can become. Much human misery does come from mimetic rivalry: individuals, families, communities, countries are all susceptible to it. Someone, somewhere will always have more, and someone, somewhere will always have less than we do. And yet we compare, endlessly, what other people have. Girard argued that ultimately Christianity is the best antidote to the violence that comes from mimetic rivalry. Let's explore a bit why.

Mimetic rivalry is a close cousin of the love of power. The love of power was why the religious and political authorities of Jesus's day concluded that he had to be put to death. He was a threat to their power, with his talk of the upside-

down world of the Kingdom of Heaven. The parable of the workers in the vineyard is a classic example of such talk. The parable tells of what we begin by assuming is a straightforward human economy. A landowner goes out at different times of the day to hire people to work for him. Some are asked to work all day, others for different lengths of time, and some only for the last hour. And the ones who think they have worked harder complain because they think they should have got more for it.

There are perhaps two messages for us in the parable. One lies in the nature of the workforce. They are of the most vulnerable kind - daily workers who won't get paid unless they find work that day, and probably won't eat if they don't. One thing the landowner was doing was ensuring that the ones whom no one else had hired did get to eat that night. If we tend to identify too readily with the complainers, we need to ask ourselves if we are ultimately saying: 'I don't care if others don't eat'.

The other message of this parable is about God's grace. By choosing a story about a situation we think we know well – after all, we *know* what is fair in the world of work, don't we? – the story shows up how different the economy of the Kingdom of Heaven is. God loves us with an excessive, overwhelming love that puts our mean-spiritedness to shame. The story shows up our tendency to mimetic rivalry – the complainers complain 'you have made *them* equal to *us*' – we, the righteous ones. But we *should* feel uncomfortable when we catch ourselves thinking like that. Thinking like the Pharisees whom Jesus confronted in the Gospel. How do we really feel about God's generosity towards the people whom, if we will admit it, we feel justified in despising?

The passage from the story of Jonah touches on the same theme of God's grace and our response to seeing it given to others. Jonah is shown as being all too

like us. God asks him to go to Nineveh, the hated capital of the adjoining superpower which had brought suffering to the people of Israel. Jonah is to go to Nineveh to warn the people that, unless they repent, God will destroy their city. But he doesn't want to go, so he tries to get away from God by boarding a ship. When a storm threatens the safety of all on board, he admits that he is probably the cause of it and allows himself to be thrown overboard to save the others. He is in turn saved by being swallowed by a large fish for three days. By then he has understood that there is no getting away from God, so he consents to go to Nineveh. There he preaches a pretty rudimentary sermon about the need to repent, at which point all the people of Nineveh immediately do repent and God forgives them. Jonah's response is to go into a serious strop. He didn't want God to forgive the people of Nineveh. He reckoned they had destruction coming to them. And if God was going to forgive them anyway, wouldn't he be made to look a fool? But God gently teases Jonah, as a parent does a child, encouraging him not to be angry about the forgiveness which others have received and showing to him the same generosity he has shown to them, nudging him back towards the light of love and forgiveness.

So, in the story of the workers in the vineyard, we thought we knew about the economy that was being described, but we find that we don't. What we do find, as Jonah did, is that in the economy of God's grace, mimetic rivalry loses its thrall because it ceases to matter. Why be envious of others because God is generous? Do we want to stay grumbling in the shadows, like the elder son in the parable of the prodigal? Fundamentally, we don't. Like children, we need to be led back into the light and given a hug. Our experience of God's freely given grace frees us to be generous ourselves. Not to compare ourselves endlessly with others but to rejoice in our common humanity, enjoying one another for the people they are.

One of the best bits of advice I have ever been given was by my tutor at theological college, just as we were leaving. She said: 'May I ask of you one thing? Don't compare yourselves. It's not what it's about.' When I heard those words, I wondered why no one had ever said them so clearly before.

It is what Jesus is saying here. 'God's economy is different from human economy. You are all equal in God's sight - all equally loved.' All the human characteristics by which we differentiate ourselves are unimportant to God. For God is bigger than us, yet we are all, equally, infinitely, precious to him.

'Don't compare yourselves. It's not what it's about.' Instead, love one another and see where that leads. I once saw a clue to where it might lead, on a notice board in a tube station in London, the day after someone had planted a bomb on a train. The bombing itself spoke of where Girard's mimetic rivalry can lead if it goes unchecked. But, written by a transport official in a neat hand, the notice said this: 'When the power of love overcomes the love of power, the world will know peace.' No one seems sure who said this originally. It has been attributed to people as diverse as William Gladstone and Jimi Hendrix. But what a beautiful thing to read on a day like that. And how profoundly true. It occurred to me that it might have been written by our Lord himself.

The world will know peace 'when the power of love overcomes the love of power'. As followers of Christ, we can believe and trust that, ultimately, it will.

Amen.