



20th September 2020
The 15th Sunday After Trinity
Sermon – St James's Piccadilly
The Revd Dr John Russell

*May I speak in the name of God – Creator,
Christ and Holy Spirit.*

Now I have wonderful memory of being in Sunday School in a previous parish, and watching a volunteer parent Sunday School leader becoming increasingly exasperated by struggling to explain the Parable of the Labourers to a group of children - because it seemed to go against everything that she – as a conscientious mum – thought that young people should be being told. Which was: work hard, be diligent in your school work, do well in your exams, get yourself a good job. That the reward you receive will be commensurate with the effort you put in. And the Gospel of Our Lord seemed to be undermining this important life lesson. And under persistent questioning from her young audience, who had astutely sniffed out a conflict between the gospel text and the teacher's message, she finally broke down and concluded 'Well, it seems that God is being very unfair!' And we quickly moved on to sing a reassuring chorus of 'We plough the fields and scatter'.

It was a great example of how strange the parables of Jesus can be, how at odds they

are with the common-sense wisdom of the world – whether that's 1st-century Palestine, or 21st century England.

Often, when we think of the parables of Jesus we think first of ones like The Good Samaritan and The Prodigal Son – the fully-fleshed out stories that perhaps we heard ourselves as children and have a comforting familiarity and, we hazily remember, a clear and reassuring message, even if we can't quite recollect exactly what that was.

Whereas most of the parables of Jesus aren't complete stories – they're more often brief puzzling representations of the kingdom of God, in which Jesus repeatedly compares God with somewhat peculiar, and often derided and unsavoury objects and characters. In today's reading, God is a vineyard owner who gives equal pay for unequal work – to the understandable annoyance of his more hard-working employees. Whether they began work at 9am, or noon, or 3pm or 5pm, they all get paid the same daily wage.

This payment policy falls hard on those who expected to see everyone getting the proper fruit of their doings. For the

outrageous outcome is that everyone receives the same Good News. And the only bad news comes from some people's resentment about the offensive equality of God's love.

Last Sunday, Lucy spoke about some of the implications of God being eternal, and I'd like to pick up on that again today. There's a concept in the classical theist understanding of God called the identity of attributes. Yes, switch your brains on everybody, it's about to get very theological for a moment – I'm going to show you that my 3 years at Mirfield were well spent!

We know that God is perfect love, and therefore there is no conflict or disunity in God. God doesn't just have love or show love. God is love, a perpetual outpouring of love - and thus, as the architect and author Buckminster Fuller observes, God is best described not as a noun, but as a verb. God is a continuous action – a 'pure act' as Aquinas says - a flow, an embrace, a dance, a mission, always and everywhere present in her creation, working for its wholeness and healing, calling all things into their fullness of being.

At the burning bush, when Moses asks God's name, God responds 'I am who I am'. I am being that I am being. The eternal 'is-ness' of God. "God is constantly God-ing.

God is the best Godder there is. God is the only Godder there is", to quote Simon Cuff.

God is pure act, and God's action is always in accordance with her being - she cannot act out of character.

And so the principle of identity of attributes is that aspects of God which seem contrary to us are not contrary in God because God is a unity. So God's mercy and God's justice; God's wisdom and God's foolishness; God's forgiveness and God's wrath; are in reality all the same thing. It's only our limited human perspective upon the thoroughly consistent action of God that makes it appear different. 'For now we see through a glass darkly' (1 Cor 13:12). As Lucy was saying last week, we try to apprehend the eternal God from our location in chronological time. And the way we speak about God – if, for example, we say that God is forgiving at one moment and angry the next, as the Hebrew Bible regularly does – often suggests a 'timed language' that doesn't properly apply to the ever-living God.

The unity of God appears to our human eyes as facets, and we need to be wary about emphasizing one facet over its apparent opposite because in doing so we diminish God and create a false image, an idol. In the 21st-century, we're still

emerging from a period where the church has often emphasized the disapproving authoritative aspects of God so strongly that we turned God into a judgemental tyrant. Now in some places the pendulum has swung so far in the other direction that God is depicted as an endless source of support and affirmation for ourselves *as we currently are*. Whereas – if we’ve read the gospels - we know full well that Jesus didn’t just go around affirming everybody in their current state.

God always looks upon us with love – but our God is a jealous lover, and the loving gaze of God always comes with a purpose to draw us further on, further in – affirming some aspects of our self, and correcting others – drawing us deeper into the mission that is God and our true self hidden in Christ.

The loving gaze of God is always the same – without partiality or favouritism amongst God’s children - but the way we individually receive and react to that gaze varies enormously, depending on how closely our current perceptions of and desires for ourselves and our lives correspond to God’s desires for us.

One striking illustration of this point from the mystic tradition would be Catherine of Genoa’s vision of the afterlife. Catherine

was a 15th-16th century Italian saint. After 10 years of being trapped in a wretched marriage to a violent and spendthrift husband, she was liberated by way of a mystical conversion experience and thereafter dedicated herself to ministering to the sick and eventually became manager of a large hospital, whilst continuing to have many visions. And Catherine had a vision the afterlife as a single situation in which all souls find themselves before the unrestrained Beatific Vision of God, which she called the fire of love. Whether an individual soul experiences that as a heavenly fire of divine ecstasy or as burning wrath, depends upon how much a particular soul is hindered by sin and how readily it can be let go of. If you surrender and let God take possession of you, then all your imperfections will melt away and your soul is purified. But if you hold onto your sin, then you create a burning hell for yourself. But God will never cease to love you and transform you and draw you towards her unity.

God loves the angels in heaven and God loves equally the devils in hell. They just respond differently.

And Catherine said she understood her vision of the afterlife because she equated it with how God worked within her on a daily basis. So her vision of the afterlife was also

a vision of everyday life. That God's continuous eternal outpouring of love is always the same. Whether in this life or the next, God draws us ever onwards with 'cords of kindness, with bonds of love', as the Prophet Hosea puts it [11:4].

Think of The Parable of the Prodigal Son. The ending of that parable is not the Father hugging his returning son in a warm embrace. The parable continues and shifts to the older brother working in the field, who hears the sound of music and dancing, and is made angry by it and refuses to join the celebration. He complains to the father: 'All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. And you've never thrown me a party like this. But when my younger brother, who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!' And the father replies: "My son, you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found." And there the parable ends, quite deliberately poised on the brink of the older brother's response to his father's words.

So – if we now return to today's gospel - you can see that the Parable of the Labourers in the Vineyard, and the Parable of the Prodigal Son are conceptually very

similar. In one we have the vineyard owner and the different groups of labourers; in the other we have the Father and the two brothers. In both parables, God's action is the same across the board but that action lands differently, is perceived and received differently by different people, depending upon what expectations of reward and entitlement we're carrying with us.

The traditional historical interpretation of these parables is that Matthew and Luke are writing about 50-60 years after the death and resurrection of Jesus, so they're addressing a mixed audience of long-standing Jewish Christians (some of whom may themselves have known the historical Jesus) and much more recent Gentile converts, and the evangelists are stressing that all of them are equally beloved by God.

But the parables have a much wider spiritual resonance than this in their juxtaposition of the economy of the world with the economy of grace. The Prodigal Son is an especially fruitful parable to pray imaginatively because there is such an open invitation for us, the audience, to step into that story, and continue the parable for ourselves. To let that parable overlay our own lives, to rotate our consciousness through the different characters and see where it resonates with us — in what sense am I the younger brother, displaced from

God's house by my impulsive infidelity? In what sense am I the older brother standing outside God's house in my bitter resentment, and who is the younger brother I'm so incensed by? Can I step into the space of the older brother at the end of the parable? And will my heart soften? Can I join the celebration and embrace my father and brother? Or will I hold onto my resentment, and stand apart? What would *you* do, the parable asks? What do you *really* do? What would you like to *be able to do*?

Grace is not a reward commensurate with the effort we put in. But it's a gift we can more fully receive by surrendering to it, by plunging daringly into the deep of the Holy Spirit without knowing what we will find. If we're standing outside of Christ, if we're operating from our false self (as Richard Rohr would say) and our self-esteem is tied up in things other than God, then the way of the cross looks like a ghastly deprivation. But when we're *in* Christ – by which we mean in sync, in harmony with the great flow of cosmic God energy - we discover that there is no greater freedom than to walk the path of love in companionship with our Lord, learning to be one of God's ambassadors of reconciliation.

To step outside the economy of the world, that competitive Trumpeting world of winners and losers, where there are finite

resources and, if you give something away, you are diminished by losing it; and to operate instead from a place of gift and grace, where you approach every encounter with another human being by asking yourself, 'what can I offer this person in order to help them become more fully and truly alive?' and the more you give away, the richer you become.

Amen