Sermon for 25th in Ordinary Year A

Readings: Exodus 16:2-15; Philippians 1:21-30; Matthew 20:1-16

i

The poor Israelites are having a tough time of it – or are they? In Exodus 16 they think they have plenty to complain about. It is not enough that God has set them free from slavery by sending a series of plagues upon the Egyptians, nor is it enough that God has led them safely across the Red Sea as on dry land, nor is it enough that God has swallowed the pursuing army of pharaoh; none of this remarkable story of grace is enough for these people. Once again they are complaining about a lack of food, blaming Moses for setting them free, and embellishing their memories of how good life was back in Egypt! Can slavery really have been that good?

So God once again comes to their rescue and provides Manna in the wilderness. The story tries to convey the idea that this was no naturally occurring phenomenon, but a miraculous provision of bread from heaven in the wilderness. The very name, Manna, expresses their sense of wonder, for Manna is derived from the Hebrew *man hu –* which means, ‘*What is it’?*

God provides the Manna with just two stipulations: firstly that they only gather enough for each day and do not try to store it up overnight, and secondly, that they observe the Sabbath day and take double the quota on the Friday.

Despite all these tremendous and unprecedented demonstrations that God is with them and God is looking after them, there are some who still cannot trust God. So just in case God doesn’t show up again the next day, some try to keep Manna overnight. It goes maggoty and rancid. This is a parable about how we have to trust God each new day and learn that we can rely on him. Grace has to be new every morning.

As Moses was soon to discover, this pattern was set for the duration of the Exodus: at every slight setback and challenge the people would abandon God and either set up their own Golden Calf or threaten to go back to Egyptian slavery.

To borrow a phrase: Never was so much given, to so many, so abundantly, with so few thanks.

ii

What a remarkable contrast we find in St Paul’s *Letter to the Philippians*.

Paul has plenty to complain about on the face of it. He has exchanged freedom and status as a leading Pharisee for prison: just the opposite of the situation in Exodus.

We know that Paul is in prison when he writes *Philippians*; we are told he is being guarded by the Praetorian Guard who are aware Paul’s only crime is his Christian faith (Phil 1:13). He is facing trial which may cost him his life (Phil 1:24). Yet Paul is unafraid: ‘For me to live is Christ and to die is gain’. Rather a remarkable contrast to the Israelites in our Exodus reading.

Traditionally, scholars have assumed this imprisonment is in Rome towards the end of Paul’s life, but Paul clearly expects to see the Philippians again soon and expects to live. It is not all that likely that Paul had such plans once he was under house arrest in Rome, so perhaps this imprisonment is in Ephesus after the riot provoked by the silversmiths. The Praetorian Guard was also stationed in Ephesus and we know that Paul sends Timothy to Corinth via Philippi from Ephesus.

If Ephesus is the location of this imprisonment, despite Luke making no reference to it, we note that Paul’s optimism was not misplaced; Paul did move on from Ephesus. This incarceration was not the ultimate one which would end his life when he was beheaded in Rome.

What accounts for such optimism, even in the face of possible death? Why doesn’t Paul grumble and groan against God for having followed Christ, surrendered his social status as one of Jerusalem’s elite and all the reward he gets is imprisonment, beatings, hunger and death threats?

The difference between the Israelites of Exodus and Paul, the new Israelite, is Jesus. The cross of Jesus transforms pain, suffering and hardship – even the prison cell – because Jesus has been there himself and overcome them and is with Paul through all his sufferings.

Now in Christ, suffering can be made to serve a purpose. Now in Christ suffering can be endured because it is part of God’s redemption of the world.

iii

It may be an obvious thing to say, but we do not all manage to match St Paul’s faith and courage. Whilst Paul serves as an exceptional example of Christian living, our passage today from Matthew 20:1-16 is a warning to us that we can all easily fall into the same trap as the Israelites of the Exodus.

The initial context of this parable is about the Jews and the gentiles in Jesus’ day. The Jews were initially God’s chosen people, but now the gentiles are being allowed in on equal terms. The parable has many other implications for later generations too.

Firstly, it reminds us that people may respond to God’s call at any stage of life. Some are Christians from childhood, or their youth, but others only late in life. All are equally welcome to God’s kingdom. This factor impinges upon our attitude to euthanasia, or medically assisted dying. Euthanasia may be acceptable to those who believe an afterlife is universally granted, but it becomes a problem for those who believe a personal response to God is required and that an afterlife is conditional on such a response or who simply think that God alone should decree our number of days.

Secondly, we may quickly deride those Jews who expected greater status in the Church than gentiles, but we are prone to make the same mistake.

How often have we witnessed European missionaries assuming they should hold on to control of the church over the heads of their new indigenous converts?

How often have we seen members of our churches resent the presence and growing involvement of newcomers?

The parable also tells us that we who have received God’s mercy have no right to object when God is equally merciful to others – even if we think they don’t deserve God’s mercy like we do. This has implications for how we respond to repentant sinners, including criminals who have repented of serious crime and how we respond to other religions.

How God treats others is not for us to determine. Islamist fanatics may wish to show God how to deal with Christians, but actually it is none of their business, neither is it our business what God makes of them.

We must resist being like the Israelites of the Exodus who are never satisfied whatever God has done for them and always want more – and still don’t really trust God. We should equally resist the idea that because we have found favour with God we have therefore gained the right to dictate to God to whom else he can show his mercy.

Many are called, but few are chosen; thus ends the parable. Many are indeed called to the kingdom, but only those who live by its rules of gratitude to God and charity to others will be found acceptable.

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**November 2016**