

SERMON 24 September 2017

It seems that generosity is in short supply. I don't mean that we don't all know many big-hearted people who give of their time, their resources, and their love to support others. There is also another kind of generosity which I think we see as well: a generosity of mind and spirit, when people make an effort to try to understand the lives of those who are different. When I say that generosity is in short supply I mean that kind of generosity. The mood of so much of the talk we hear around us, talk that it is hard to escape from at times, is very often niggardly, limited and limiting, more about self- protection or promotion and about adamantly putting forward one point of view without taking time to really listen to the opposite opinion. The rhetoric around the same-sex marriage vote is a clear example of this. The talk has hardly been edifying. How much listening has it enabled between those who are really hurting, those who feel, on both sides of the so-called debate, that they will lose something vital to their lives should the vote not go their way? How much care has there been for the gay and lesbian people who are part of our families, our communities and whose mental health has, as we had been warned would happen, been so badly affected by what they hear being said about them? How much have the gut reactions that all this evokes taken over our basic generosity and respect and over-ruled our ability to hear and see each other, wherever we stand on this issue. And it is not just this emotive issue. There are many ways these days in which our buttons may be pressed so that we then press the "lock" button.

There was an interesting article about this in last weekend's Good Weekend magazine by David Lester. He wrote about meeting up with an American cousin for the first time in 30 years. She was 5 years old when they had last seen each other. On her first day in Sydney he drove her

around sightseeing. As they talked, it emerged that she had voted for Donald Trump. David said he had a huge reaction, pulled over the car and nearly made her get out. He couldn't believe it. It took quite a while of deliberately not talking politics for them to get this new relationship back on track. They did that and became very fond of each other. But he wrote regretting that he had never even asked her why she had voted as she did and what were the experiences in her life that had formed her opinion. In effect, he had not been generous enough in his mind to do that. As he says, we see this lack of generosity all around us and we see the consequences.

In these times, we live with a background of suspicion and fear of others that really becomes about feeling insecure and thinking we may lose what we have. It takes considerable self-awareness to be generous. Being generous may well be what we hope to be like and we may put effort into moving in this direction. Our inter-faith prayers for peace show that there is a strong thread of such hopefulness that connects people from so many different backgrounds, races, cultures, faiths. When we can celebrate this, it is really heart-warming. There are many people who are an inspiration in the generous nature of their openness, their hearing of the other who is different. It makes us aware that the thing that creates both change and a strong foundation for the common good comes from men and women who are secure in their beliefs in a way that allows them to be humble and respect those who are different.

To be truly generous seems to require that humility and respect. Taking that beyond words actually means looking at ourselves and our responses quite deeply, and that's not easy. Indeed it seems to challenge things which we instinctively turn to as our foundation. I think it

is fascinating how even very young children have a strong sense of justice and, even more, of injustice. When one young child snatches a toy from a toddler who is engrossed in playing with it, there usually is a very noisy reaction. When they learn to talk, children will soon say “It’s not fair...” One of the hard lessons children have to come to deal with is that life is often not fair. It is a good thing we have this innate sense of injustice because, as we know too well, there is so much of it in the world. Some of it is so vast it seems impossible to deal with. Why should we have more than enough to eat and drink, so much easily accessible medical care for all our needs, and so on and so on? Of course, thinking like this can become an unhelpful guilt trip. There is structural injustice. We can try and shut it off but it doesn’t go away and we all have to find ways of dealing with it, of thinking about it, of deciding how much we allow it into our lives or not. It is always a struggle for the Church to reflect on how it is called to respond. That reflection really has to be preceded by pondering the generosity that is there at the heart of the gospel. All of these thoughts about generosity and justice lie at the heart of our discipleship.

Today’s parable from Matthew’s gospel challenges our thinking about these things. This story is only found in Matthew: the story of the vineyard owner who represents God, and the workers he hires to go to his vineyard. He makes an agreement with those first ones. As we heard, he goes back to the market place 3 times during the day, taking on more of the men who have been waiting there, hoping to get work and to be able to feed their families. I know I have told you before about this being made real for me in Princeton in the below-zero temperatures on a Sunday morning; seeing Hispanics gathered in the town square, trying to keep warm, hoping to be collected in someone’s van and given

work for the day. It felt real survival stuff. In the parable it was the heat of the day that was endured. How relieved must those last workers have been even to get a bit of work!

Then comes the shocking bit, the bit that really challenges us: the working day is over and the people line up for their pay. Notice something important: the ones who had been there all day are at the back of the line. They see what is happening in front of them. Had Jesus told the story differently, they might never have seen that the workers who came last were given just the same as them. They might have gone away content that they had been paid according to what had been agreed. But that is not what happened. Everyone was paid the same. "It's not fair!" We may well complain with them. Then the vineyard owner asks them "Are you envious because I am generous?". Of course they are! And we are probably like that too! They want to experience that generosity for themselves. Why doesn't God love me that much too!

This connects us to another parable, a story that only appears in Luke's gospel: The Prodigal Son. This is the elder brother syndrome, the one who turned sour because he saw how extraordinarily generous his father was towards his wayward brother. There, the father reminds him that everything he has is this son's to share also. But, from the older son's point of view, he wanted to feel special too.

That generosity of God's is truly overwhelming because it hovers there, trying to break through our closed off notions of what we think we deserve when we have been doing our best to act rightly. It is hard to see others being blessed. Standing at the back of the line we do see that in this story today. We see the goodness of God demonstrated towards

others. It doesn't mean that we are not shown God's love. But God wants us to look from the back of the queue so that we can understand the perspective that Jesus talks about when he says, "The last will be first, and the first will be last." This is really challenging.

How generous can we be in our minds and hearts? How open can we be to hear and see things from another's point of view? These things often don't seem fair. In Peter Schaffer's play "Amadeus", there is a confrontation between Salieri and Mozart. Salieri was a hard-working musician and composer, a good one. As a teenager he had gone into church and made a bargain with God that he would write glorious music for God if God would grant him fame and fortune in return. He got that. Then along came the teenage prodigy Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, who lived a disgraceful lifestyle and wrote far more glorious music than Salieri, and, as his name Amadeus suggests, was "beloved of God". "It's not fair!"

I think it is often hard to cope with God's generosity and justice. Really, in everything - God's love, God's patience, God's forgiveness and grace is overwhelmingly generous. It is just we ourselves who have difficulty with it. Many years ago I led a day retreat for a Women's Fellowship at a church on the outskirts of Sydney. I think they were expecting a rather solemn Bible Study. I had decided to spend the time reflecting on the extravagant generosity of God and had quite a lot of colourful cloths, beautifully wrapped chocolate ladybirds, flowers and other things. I don't think they could cope with it! It was very different from what they thought they were going to get. Maybe it wasn't holy enough!

We have so much to learn and to grow into when we can begin to absorb this generosity and justice of God. If it kicks away the customary supports that make us feel secure where we are - which is often at the front of the line, if we feel at risk, then maybe that is a good thing, because we discover that God's generous outstretched, welcoming embrace will pick us up again, as the Prodigal father did in that other story. Maybe we can feel that that embrace is offered to us, as it was to the older son, even when we have stopped expecting it because we have locked down our own responses with some sense of duty. Maybe then we can join in the celebratory feast that is offered to all. If God's generosity and justice helps us stop, teaches us to listen, to hear those who seem to be threateningly different, then the gospel is finding a way in, and, hopefully, enlarging our hearts and minds. Thanks be to God in whom all things are possible!