

**SERMON FOR THE 25th SUNDAY IN
ORDINARY TIME 21.9.14
ALL SAINTS CHURCH, BIRKENHEAD
REV JORDAN GREATBATCH**

One evening a rich man was riding in his limousine when he saw two men along the road eating grass. Disturbed, he yelled at his driver to stop and got out to investigate. He asked one man "Why are you eating the grass?" "Well, we don't have any money for food" the poor man replied. "So we have to eat grass." "Well then, come with me to my house and I'll feed you" the rich man said. "But sir, I also have a wife and two children with me. They are over there, under that tree." "Ok, bring them along too" the rich man replied.

Turning to the other poor man he stated, "You come with us, also." The second man, in a pitiful voice, then said, "But sir, I also have a wife and SEVEN children with me!" "Very well then, bring them all" the rich man answered. They all piled into the limousine, which was no easy task. Once under way, one of the poor fellows turned to the rich man and

said, "Sir, you are truly too kind... Thank you for taking all of us with you." The rich man replied, "No problem, glad to do it." "You'll really love my place" "The grass is almost a foot high".

Generosity can be difficult. Not always because we don't want to show it, but because there are all sorts of difficult questions that arise out of being generous.

One of these questions is about the use of money or goods when they are given. We are often anxious about how our money and goods will be used, and whether or not it will be wasted. Generosity is however a theme found throughout the scriptures.

And today we are confronted with two passages of scripture that have in common this theme of generosity. The first is from the book of Exodus. Here we have the early Hebrew community complaining to God because he is not being generous enough. In our reading from Matthew, we have a parable of Jesus where workers complain that the owner of the vineyard is too generous.

But the similarities do not stop there. We also have two stories that centre on the beginning of two communities. In Exodus, it is the beginning of the Israelite community, a people of former slaves who are now beginning the journey into forming a new community. In Matthew, we have the followers of Jesus, former peasants, fisherman and tax collectors who are themselves part of a forming of a new community.

Moses in the book of Exodus, and Jesus in Matthew's Gospel are trying to do the same thing. They are trying to create new communities founded on new principles. Principles that revolve around a new order, a new way of living and a new way of being community. And at the centre of this new community is the principle of generosity.

Generosity is to be the glue that holds together the community; generosity is to be the mark of the new community. Moses and Jesus are creating new communities, communities of generosity.

All of us, in our lives have started a new journey and become part of a new community like those described.

This is because doing something new is essential to our lives as followers of Jesus. Therefore the important thing is how we shape that new beginning, how do we, like those early Israelites and Jesus' first disciples want our community and lives to look like.

What do we want as our principle? Perhaps like our scriptures this morning, we want our community to be one of generosity.

If this is the case, then what does a community of generosity look like? Well, perhaps our scriptures can speak to us as we seek that vision today.

We have two pictures of generosity in our two readings. Firstly in the book of Exodus, we have the people of Israel literally 'murmuring' to God about the fact that they have nothing to eat, and that they would be better off back in slavery in Egypt where they could at least full their stomachs.

In response to this ‘murmuring’ God hears them, and God responds. His response is to show generosity to the people of Israel and provide “meat to eat in the evening and your fill of bread in the morning”. God sends the meat and bread in equal measure for all the people, and all are feed.

This leads to our next story of generosity, this time from Matthew’s Gospel. Here Jesus tells his followers a parable. And as we heard read, the parable is of a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire labourers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the labourers for the usual daily wage, he sends them to work. He then subsequently goes back at noon and hires some more, and finally at around 5pm he hires further workers.

Now at the end of the day the owner of the vineyard tells his manager to bring the labourers together to receive their pay. And then, to the astonishment of them all he gives to each regardless of their start times the same usual daily wage.

Those who started in the morning are irate that those who started in the evening get the same pay. The

labourers are shocked, and I suspect we the listeners are also shocked. If we really just sit with the consequences of this parable for a moment it reveals something very challenging. The manager, at his own discretion gives each worker the same amount despite the fact that some have worked longer than others.

This parable, like the many parables of Jesus is designed to shift our perspective and challenge us. So in what ways does this parable shift our perspective and challenge us? Well at the start of the parable Jesus tells us that this parable is an image of the Kingdom of God. So we get a clue from the outset that this parable is about God. And it seems that God is the landowner, the one who hires and pays the workers. And so if we to take it to its logical conclusion we are only left with one end. *This* is what God’s generosity looks like.

And in doing so Jesus makes two points about God. 1. He points to the justice of his payment of a day’s wage for a day’s work but also the right to pay what he wants. 2. He claims the right to be generous.

This kind of generosity is so radical that we are left with many questions. One of these questions is what kind of God would offer the same reward to those who have earned it and those who have not? Well put quite frankly, the God Jesus claims to be. So in turn it is the God we worship, the God we follow. This God turns upside down all our notions of generosity, fairness and equality.

As scholar Warren Carter puts it 'Instead of maintaining differentiation among the labourers based on performance, instead of reinforcing the superiority of some at the expense of the rest, (the landowner) has evened out the distinctions and treated them in solidarity as equals. Instead of using wages to reinforce distinction, he uses them to express equality and solidarity.

In other words this gives us an image of a God who is generous to *all* people regardless of what they have done, or who they are. This is a radical generosity, a generosity that challenges the ideas that surround us. Ideas of winner and loser, superior and inferior, insider and outsider, honoured and shamed. *All* are deserving of God's generosity says Jesus.

The parable therefore envisions an alternative social order similar to that of the Israel wilderness community. For their bread was daily bread, a gift, shared equally, without distinction, and so this has consequences for our own lives but also our wider economic systems. As we seek to be more like God.

For this is quite simply an image of the grace and love of God. A love that does not hold our wrongs against us, a love that does not abandon us, a love that is generous beyond measure. The love of a God who lavishes us with his generosity so that we too may be people of radical generosity. Generosity is difficult. But may God's grace lead us to look through his eyes. To be generous people, generous to ourselves, generous to God, generous to those around us.

Amen