



## **A Homily by The Right Reverend Susan J.A. Bell**

Sunday, September 20, 2020

Scripture Passages: Exodus 16:2-15 & Matthew 20:1-16

*+ In the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.*

If your first reaction to today's gospel was "Hey! That's not fair!" then I suspect you're not alone. I had that reaction too. In fact, I heard echoes of that cry in the Old Testament lesson too. The children of Israel are fed up with freedom. That freedom meant that they would have to forage for themselves and not be given slave rations, was in the fine print of the agreement they had with Moses. And they had clearly signed that agreement in enthusiasm and haste to get out of Egypt while they could. What the Israelites have this morning in our reading is buyer's remorse. And they're not shy telling Moses about it. "It's not fair" they cry – at least under Pharaoh we had enough to eat!

It's not fair.

Well, I think that we were meant to have that reaction – because this is subversive story telling in both readings which turns normal values upside down. This is Jesus telling a parable that is arresting and attention-grabbing. The conclusion to it seems unfair – in worldly terms. This is Jesus describing the Father who defies the wisdom or custom of this world.

This is the author of Exodus telling us that for the Israelites, with freedom comes new responsibility – and a new and fairly profound reliance on God. Both narratives grab our attention and tell us some things that are profound about the love of God.

Like where does fairness come into the equation? What does fairness mean to the Father?

As parents of four children, My husband and I spent a lot of time making sure things were fair when the children were little. Fairness seems to be a cardinal value in a child's world. How many times have we heard that plaintive cry from children "It's not fair! She or he got this and therefore I should get that!" And I suppose that feeling that we have a right to proportionate reward never really leaves us. That's why that sense of unfairness strikes us so clearly about the

actions of the landowner. His actions seem unjust – disproportionate and arbitrary.

And yet, there is something about this parable that we do recognize. The employer did keep the contract he had made with the first men that he hired but also gave the last men that he hired what they needed to live. The last men hired received their denarius – an amount of money that was considered equivalent to a day's living.

You see, what Jesus is demonstrating is that in God's economy, a different standard of fairness is applied: and that standard is about need. In the Exodus narrative, God sends manna and meat – just enough to feed the Israelites each day. He gives as they have need – he gives so that the connection between the giving and the giver is made manifest. This creates a new relationship between the Father and his children of Israel. To view it in this way puts many things in a new perspective. It's enough to open the door to a different way of thinking.

This reminds me of the pursuit of fairness that every human parent has to negotiate. We try to make sure that everyone gets the same amount of dessert for instance – although there are times when I honestly used to feel I needed to get out the scales to weigh things to the nearest ounce to achieve absolute equity. And of course, we work hard to ensure that everyone got and gets the same amount of attention and love and material resources spent on them.

But we also always told the children that we reserved the right to give to each of them as they had any kind of need at any given time – saying to them that over time – over a life time - it all evens out. Sometimes one or more of them have greater need than the others – and that's life – and at that time, whatever is needed must be given in love. So it might not always feel equal in the strictest sense, but it is fair - there is comfort in knowing that they all have access to whatever they need as they have need of it.

On a much greater scale, I believe that this is something like what Jesus is getting at with his parable. He's saying both that God's ways are not our ways and human categories of fairness are not always the kingdom way of doing things – that there is another ethic at work here.

And this is probably where Jesus had the full attention of the people he was speaking to. Jesus' attitude towards the last and least in society was other-worldly.

What he was saying is this: that God's Grace is there for those who have been righteous all their lives but also for those who have messed up their lives, their relationships, and that as much Grace is as necessary is there equally for both parties.

We see this in the parable of the prodigal son. There is no distinction made between the prodigal son and the one who stayed with his Father all his life and worked on the farm. The Father in that parable loves them both deeply and equally.

This may strike us as unfair, until that is, we realize that there is a different set of values operating. People are being treated according to their needs, not according to what they deserve.

The love of God is not about proportioning approval and reward for good behaviour or about honouring rational agreements. It's about – and I want to be careful here in the way that I describe this – God's love in worldly terms – according to the way we do things seems nuts. It seems outrageous, illogical and maybe even irresponsible.

You see, we're supposed to learn something about love. And that is that love is not a fee for service. Love is love and God gives it to us regardless of our "worthiness" regardless of our own judgement of ourselves and others. And in doing so, we are drawn into an ever more intimate relationship with God. It is a relationship that is – like the children of Israel's relationship with God – radically dependent upon the Father's love for us.

In Jesus we learn that God does not work with a scale measuring out who is deserving of love and who not, but simply loving because that is what is at the heart of the Father's being.

I hope that's good news for you this afternoon. That you are loved. So much. Unfairly. Illogically. Extravagantly. Truly, deeply, madly.

*+In the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.*