

Sermon for am Trinity 15 2020

"Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. ¹⁵ Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?"^[e] ¹⁶ So the last will be first, and the first will be last."

Some years ago I had a conversation with a woman who happened to be the organist in the church to which I was called. She was a lovely woman, very devout, and committed to being in church every Sunday and for every wedding and funeral. She was extremely reliable and reasonably competent with the organ.

During the conversation she noted that it seemed unfair that people who came to the faith late in life would receive the same eternal life that she anticipated. She had been faithful her entire life. She had participated in the administration of the parish and she was involved in the prayer groups and the fundraisers. She noted that this was hard work and that was why she believed that people who had never done anything productive in the church should experience some sort of penalty prior to salvation. It seemed to me that she would be a great advocate for some form of purgatory.

The gospel reading from Matthew explores this very thing. Not purgatory, but all people being treated as equal in the eyes of God. In God's eyes no individual person is of any more value than another. In the parable the landowner is God and the laborers are the people of the village. Humanity if you like. The method of hiring laborers was exactly as explained. The people who required a job in order earn money to buy food would wait in the market square and landowners would employ them for whatever task was required. We might consider it to be an ancient example of Job-Seeker.

The landowner in the parable made an agreement with those who started early. They would receive a full day's pay for their work. It was a fair, perhaps even generous, wage. They were content. Well they were content until they realised that the people who only worked an hour or two received the same amount of money that they had agreed to. We can imagine the shop steward complaining to the landowner concerning the unfairness evident in this wage scheme. It is interesting that he argued that those who began at sunrise should be paid more than these others, rather than argue that those who started later should receive less. Human nature I guess.

When we translate this into the spiritual understanding that our Lord intended, we can identify the daily wage as salvation, eternal life. This gift of life from God cannot be increased. One cannot argue for a double dose of eternal life simply because some other person who had discovered the faith in their latter years would also receive that God given gift of life.

God promises that those people who believe in God will receive the eternal life won for us when our Lord died upon the cross. We have done nothing to deserve this gift of life from God. It is just that, pure gift. We, therefore, have no say over who will or will not be saved. Yes, thankfully, there are many people who have believed in God all of their lives. They have been wonderful examples of faith and have done much to maintain the presence of the church, and the continuation of the faith. These people have been diligent in prayer and in works. For this we offer our thanks, for without their commitment and example we may not have been encouraged to believe.

Surely prayer and works identify the faith to which we are called and in which we are comfortable. It is spiritual and physical. It is internal and it is external. The identifying factor is that it is the spiritual, the internal, which drives the physical and the practical. Our faith demands that we love our neighbour and that we care for the widow and the orphan. We are to reach out in love to the disadvantaged and the poor, the displaced and the homeless. We do not do this because we think that it will ensure our salvation, but rather, we do this because it is the natural expression of our faith.

It does not matter at what age we discover the joy of faith. Young, old, or in-between. It does not matter whether it is something that has been gradually intensifying for our entire life and has in some way matured. It does not matter if it is a road to Damascus experience where we come to the faith in an instant of sudden illumination. The outcome is the same. The gift of life is exactly that. It is a gift which is un-earned and un-deserved. It is our God reaching out to us in love and embracing us.

Paul expands this thought as he writes his epistle to the Galatians. The circumcision party argue that one must be circumcised or you cannot be saved. It is the sign that God gave to Abraham. On the eighth day all male children were to be circumcised to show that they belonged to God. Paul argues that this is simply a meaningless human activity that has lost its value and lost its identity. The Jews are arguing that the law demands compliance with this activity. Paul points out that even those who are circumcised cannot live in full obedience to the Law. If Obedience to the Law was all that was required for salvation then not one person could be saved. It is an impossible goal.

Paul argues that rather than blindly following the demands of the Jews and be circumcised the Gentiles need instead to become a new creation. They are to be changed in the heart and in the soul. Their very being is to be focussed on God in faith. It is faith that will give life, not circumcision.

Of course by now we have discovered that the people being bullied into circumcision are the gentiles. They are the new boys on the block. The Jews have been faithful to the Law all of their lives, for generations, and here they find the Gentiles being offered salvation from their Jewish God. And, they are not even circumcised! It is not as if they have had to follow the Law. It is doubtful that they know anything about the Jewish Law. And yet Paul was promising them that if they have faith they will see God.

The Jews in this parable are the lovely woman who was the organist upset about newcomers being promised eternal life. They are the shop steward attacking the landowner about the unfairness of the wage system. They are us when we pass judgment on another person and suggest that God does not, and will not, love them.

Our God is a generous and loving God and he offers eternal life to each and everyone of us. It is a gift, and we receive it equally. There are no favourites. No one is more special than another. We are God's children and we all respond to God as our faith begins, increases, and matures. The key to eternal life brings us back to our love for God and of our neighbour. It is these two things firmly entrenched within our faith in God. Love and faith grant us a firm foundation from which we will be raised to eternal life.