

SUNDAY 20TH SEPTEMBER 2020

Main text: MATTHEW 20v1-16

Here's a question to ponder ... one you may have recognised at different times: how can I sleep at night knowing me and God are in a good place? We're at peace ... nothing to confess, nothing to worry about, nothing to fear.

For a few it's a question with no substance, because they ditched the notion of God a long time ago. Yet the psalmist writes, Psalm 14v1:

"A fool says in his heart, 'There is no God' ..."

Others feel the matter is beyond our grasp ... if there is someone to call God, he is so unfathomable we can't be sure ... so best to bury the question for as long as we can. Equally there are a good number for whom it's just a line of thought to put on hold ... because they are fit and young enough ... just too busy doing life here and now.

In the section prior to today's gospel reading an unnamed man puts himself in front of Jesus asking: 'What good deed must I do to have eternal life?' There follows a brief Q and A in which it is apparent this is a man of exemplary character and probably some standing in the community. Even so, he was not at ease or he would not have brought the question.

When Jesus highlights his wealth and love of the lifestyle he can afford as like an idol, he knows Jesus has hit his Achilles' heel. He slopes away disappointed with the outcome, not ready to change, still unhappy with his lot.

Some who will say: Of course God and me are just fine ... aren't we ... because:

- Surely CofE still counts...
- Everyone who knows me will vouch for how decent I am
- I do my bit in the family, for neighbours, charity and the community as a whole, as time allows, and
- I certainly don't have a torrid past or been party to heinous crimes ... unlike one or two I could name!

All those reactions may be true and laudable, but reflect a transactional rather than a relational connection with the Lord ... one that assumes, because I do my bit as I judge appropriate, all will be well; forgetting we have reduced God to something not much more than the golden calf in Moses' time!

Jesus' parable that we read in Matthew 20 comes out of the conversation with the man seeking assurance. One person's search and question seized by Jesus as a teaching opportunity and to invite reflection, repentance and the reawakening of their relationship with God, for those with ears to hear.

In terms of the story Jesus told:

- a) When all the workers hired at different times of the day end up with the same pay, In 1st century Palestine a denarius was what might call the living wage for a day's work;
- b) The phrases "kingdom of heaven" on the lips of Jesus and "eternal life" from the man seeking reassurance mean the same thing. Jesus spoke not about location nor was focussed on the forever and ever. For him to have eternal life is to be in the realm of heaven ... heaven is first and foremost how God functions as family and into which we are invited.

There are some important practical implications in this time of substantial uncertainty and seismic change unfolding around the world.

- Because we believe Jesus is the same yesterday, today and forever (Hebrews 13v8), the same approach by you or me as the young man - seeking reassurance and the knowledge of being at peace with God - would receive the same answer. The details of the parable may be altered to fit our 21st century context and to expose particular idols we have sought to hide, but the thrust of what he says is unchanged.
- The culture of heaven can seem upside down to those on the outside and clinging to a vision of the world that was ... when we pray for life to be on earth as it is in heaven, we may be asking the Lord to take us boldly where we have probably not gone before.
- Jesus doesn't ask us to change our ways and manner of living to any greater degree than he did in coming as a human being. Paul, in Philippians 2, invites us to embrace a mindset the same as Jesus:

"... who though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant ..."

This is the very Jesus whose basic mantra was 'Come follow me ...' He never asked anything of anyone that, with God's help, is not possible.

- When we think of God as our provider, our shepherd, the one who leads and guides us ...we are forced to admit he does not buy into meritocracy as we may like to order the world around us ... he is committed to what I need, rather than what I think I deserve.
- Generosity without any expectation of a quid pro quo becomes a hallmark of what the unbelieving world should expect of us, as God's representatives and partners in extending the realm of heaven today; the reason it can work is what we give to others is the overflow of what we have received and recognised as from God ... because as we read in Psalm 24v:1:

"The earth is the Lord's and the fulness thereof..."