

HOMILY for the 25th Sunday

Today's Gospel (Matt 20:1-16) shows us yet again how silly it is to take the Parables of Jesus literally. Indeed, in this case, I don't think any employer ever has paid someone who worked one hour the same amount as someone who'd worked all day. You can hear me speaking this Homily on <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=meyuH0gJZwU>

We can easily imagine therefore, as Jesus first told this story, how people laughed in astonishment, or even shock, as the story unfolded. And that, of course, is the point. The story is meant to shock us. It is meant to remind us how often we tend to think of God as rather like us, but with a few extra superhuman powers, rather than realising that God is actually totally different from us. Yes, we may be like God in some ways, made in his image, as the Bible says, but God is nothing like us.

It always amazes me how people down the ages have easily taken Bible Passages to mean what they want them to mean, rather than what they actually say. The classic one, that has been cheerfully said to me any number of times on a sunny day, and is relevant to the Gospel message today, is "*Morning Father. The sun shines on the righteous.*" If you've ever said that to me, you will have got a rather sharp response "*No it doesn't, for that's not what Jesus said. He said that the sun shines on everyone, whether we are good or bad, or somewhere in between.*" Underlying this, is our very human desire to put people into two categories – good people on one side who are loved by God – and bad people on the other side who God does not love.

Now I'm sure you know that this is not how Jesus thinks about us; and yet sadly some people have been taught to think like this, persuaded that the only way to be loved by God is to try very very hard to be as good as possible, and to feel very very guilty when they fail. It amazes me how many Catholics I've met bear a burden of guilt that never seems to leave them, even after they have made their Confession. They tell of priests going on and on about hell and damnation, or they've had parents who were never satisfied however good their exam results were. The idea that God loves them endlessly, even though we hear it from the Bible again and again, just doesn't seem to get through to them. Listen to a verse from our Psalm today (144/145) just to prove that it's there in the Old Testament too. "*The Lord is kind and full of compassion, slow to anger, abounding in love. How good is the Lord to all, compassionate to all his creatures.*"

I remember a time when I was a teenager, and I did something wrong that really upset my mother. She showed me then what real love, real compassion, is like; for instead of getting angry with me, she began to cry. My response was astonishment and sadness. I hadn't realised how stupid and thoughtless I had been. She probably would have been justified in getting angry with me, but instead she showed me how much she loved me; and so, instead of feeling guilty and angry myself, I was simply sad and apologetic, and determined not to be so stupid and thoughtless in the future. It reminds me of that moment when Jesus had just arrived for the last time in Jerusalem and wept over that great city. (Luke 19:41) St Luke uses the incident to demonstrate God's love. For Jesus is not just weeping over Jerusalem, but weeping over the whole sad world that Jerusalem represents – a world that longs for God, and

yet so often gets things wrong. It reminds us that if we are to be only a little bit like God, then we need to try to avoid anger, even when we are confronted with something really wrong. Anger helps no-one; whereas sadness, and a determination to take action, is so much more effective, and so much better for us.

This is but one example, and one demonstrated so effectively by Jesus' Parable today, where we can only marvel at the restraint God shows, faced with so much that is wrong in the world. God always gives us another chance. God is always willing us to do better, rather than getting angry with us for failing. As St Paul says in his famous passage on love, and of course he's talking about God, "*Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.*" (1 Cor 13:7) That's why, much to our indignation, people who do evil things are still loved endlessly by God, still given another chance, still looked upon as precious, so that even at the eleventh hour they may find their way out of evil and into love, may find their way to God.

I once asked a wise and holy person what they thought it was like to be face to face with God, after we die, what judgement would be like if it was not simply facing God's anger. He suggested that the real pain of meeting God after death will not be facing his anger, but facing his love. Faced with such love, love beyond our imagining, we will realise in the most painful and yet most wonderful way possible how often we have failed to love like that, and yet how much we are loved. Our problem is that we expect God to be like us, when we are faced with wrong doing, and instead God will say, as we heard in our 1st Reading from Isaiah (55:6-9) "*Yes, the heavens are as high above earth as my ways are above your ways, my thoughts above your thoughts.*"

All this surely means that it is not so much what we do or what we don't do that matters to God, but how we approach life, how we think about it. Our actions will always fall short of the perfect love of God, but instead of feeling guilty about this, or endlessly trying to be perfect, we are called to abandon our human judgements on what is right or wrong, on who is good or bad, but concentrate simply on getting on with the life God has given us as best we can. Perhaps we ought to think of our life as like a garden with ourselves as the gardener. There is no such thing as a perfect garden, for a garden is always changing, and what is beautiful at one moment, is fading at another. All we can do is tend the garden as best we can, and love it even in its imperfection. In other words, to understand God's love means that we must love ourselves. That's surely what St Paul was getting at in our 2nd Reading (Phil 1:20-24) although I think he says it better in Romans (14:8) "*If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's.*" May that be more true for us every day.

