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From Envy to Generosity (Matthew 20.1-16)

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Around the world, in the month of September, Christians mark the Season of Creation. Over the years, at Benedictus, we've approached this season in different ways. Last year, we explored the meaning of ecological conversion; the year before we reflected on the doctrine of creation and what it means to understand the world *as created*; another time we focused on particular aspects of the natural world – the gift of land, trees, wilderness and rivers. This year, prompted by the gospel readings set for the next three weeks, I'm proposing that we reflect on the question of *human nature*.

This might seem odd. After all, isn't the whole point of the Season of Creation that it draws us past anthropocentrism? Aren't we invited to focus our worship on the other-than-human world for a change – to give up being the centre of our own attention? Well, yes! But as we all know, the life and future of the non-human world is directly connected to how human beings are and to our relationship with our own nature. The Australian based Commission for the Human Future has listed ten existential risks to life on earth. They include such things as ecological collapse, weapons of mass destruction, global poisoning, global warming, pandemic disease and dangerous new technologies. But the tenth and final risk listed is of a different order – it's not just another threat generated by our interaction with the world, but something internal to human being itself. According to the Commission, the final risk to a shared future is human 'self-delusion'.¹ In a related vein, it's well accepted that what stands in the way of effective action on climate change is not the lack of scientific or technical solutions, but blockages to action connected to deep tendencies in human nature – the lust for power or control, habits of avarice, apathy

¹ See <https://www.australia21.org.au/the-commission-for-human-future> (accessed 16 September 2020).

and envy. Sociologist Karen O'Brien told a conference of climate researchers in 2015 that 'the biggest risk of all that we face is that we're addressing the wrong problem'.² And this suggests that if we're to use this liturgical Season of Creation to foster our connection with and care for the natural world, then coming to grips more fully with our human nature is an essential part of the work.

Except there's a sense in which this may seem like a cheap and not very productive theme. I can rail on about how bad we humans can be – how greedy, selfish, deluded, how destructive is unredeemed human nature; we can agree together about our 'sin' and worry about how we might force or persuade those in power to *be* differently; and in the end, where will it get us? We know this stuff already, and in any case, most of us are doing our best. But actually I'm hoping that in these few reflections on human nature we can open up something more helpful – something more than easy moralizing and self-flagellation. Something, in fact, that honours the richness and subtlety of Jesus' teaching about the nature of human being and the possibility of its transformation. Three of the parables towards the end of Matthew's gospel are particularly challenging and illuminating in this regard. Today, we read the first of these – the parable of the labourers in the vineyard.

Most of you will be familiar with the story. And it's certainly taken on a new resonance for me ever since I stayed with a friend in the Mission District in San Francisco years ago, and saw the Hispanic day labourers standing each morning at the street corner beneath her apartment, waiting to be picked out, given work and so the means of subsistence for the day. In the parable, the landowner is someone who either chronically underestimates the number of labourers he needs or he's someone who's deeply attuned to the needs of those waiting to be employed. It's as if he is compelled to keep giving them a chance, first going out early in the morning, and then returning four more times during the day – at about nine, about noon, about three and about five o'clock, the text says – each time hiring those he finds.

² Laurie Goering, 'Technical solutions alone can't fix climate change: scientists', Reuters, July 9, 2015, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-climatechange-science-technology-idUSKCN0PI23K20150708> (accessed 16 September 2020).

But it's when he comes to pay them all, that the parable really begins to do its work. The landowner tells his manager to call the labourers together and give them their pay, 'beginning with the last and then going to the first'. 'When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage' (Matthew 20.9-10). But that's not fair, they cry! And don't we instinctively feel the same? They had indeed 'borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat' (20.12). Shouldn't those who have a go, get a go? Clearly people who stand around idle most of the day because no one has hired them, are not people who are having a go – at least not like we are ... So how can they get the same as us?

Well, I think it's worth noticing a couple of details at this point. If the landowner hadn't specifically ordered the last to be paid first, then those who were first would never have known they were receiving the same amount. If they'd been paid first, presumably they would simply have received their wage and moved away. So there's something deliberate about the set up. The first are meant to know, they're receiving no more than the last. And perhaps also the last are meant to experience that they're as valued as the first (and in the background to this story may be Matthew's concern to communicate to his Jewish Christian audience that those who convert to Christ from a Gentile background, and who are therefore latecomers to the faith of Israel, are no less valued by God).

The second thing to notice is that though the labourers who worked the whole day have a sense of injustice, they've actually been given exactly what they were promised. The landowner specifically agreed to pay those hired first 'the usual daily wage' and that is what they get. If there'd been no subsequent hirees, they would have thought all was well – and even now, they've lost nothing. Nothing has been taken away from them in order that those hired last be paid equally. So the sense of injustice arises, not because of a broken promise or an exploitative agreement; it's entirely generated by their comparison of themselves with the others, their sense of increased entitlement. And this is tellingly revealed in the text.

Their grumble is expressed in the words: 'These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us ...'. How dare you make them equal to us? What they object to is that the others receive as gift what they consider they have earned. It's not fair. But the landowner insists on his prerogative to dispose of his belongings as he chooses, and he nails the real source of their dissatisfaction: 'are you envious because I am generous?'

Well, I don't know how this story lands for you. Maybe especially those of us who are oldest children can identify with the grumbling of these responsible, hardworking, put upon labourers. Those feckless late-comers are just like our younger siblings who got to stay up past 7 o'clock years before we were allowed to, and got a bike when they were only 8, and a watch ... Envy. Comparative advantage. What are you getting for free, that I'm not?

Rowan Williams says the parables of Jesus are 'crystallizations of how people decide for or against self-destruction, for or against newness of life, acceptance, relatedness. Repeatedly, as the kingdom of God is spoken of, Jesus simply presents a situation, a short narrative; like this, he says'.³ If this parable is a crystallization of tendencies within us, if it holds up a mirror to our society, it suggests that the kingdom of heaven, portrayed here as a dynamic of mercy, inclusion and unmerited generosity is going to prove a challenging environment for those fixated on policing their own and others' just desserts, for those habitually competing for advantage.

We might think we're not caught in this trap. But my sense is it's pretty pervasive. For myself, for example, I know that sometimes if I hear someone else being freely praised, my first reaction is not gladness for them but an envious desire to be praised myself, as much and preferably more; or it provokes an anxious twinge of comparative inadequacy – maybe I'm not good enough, maybe I'm not making it, maybe they don't like me. At other times, I can be feeling quite satisfied and content with my lot, and then come across someone who seems to have achieved more or

³ Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), p.41.

got there with less effort, and rather than feeling a sense of abundance at life's gifts to us all, I feel as though I am somehow diminished – made less by their flourishing.

'The riddle of the parables', Williams says, 'lies in making the connection with one's own transformation – that is, encountering God in the parable, receiving that therapy of spirit'.⁴ And speaking for myself, I need this therapy. I need to be reminded to release that envious twinge, that compulsion to compare myself or assert my sense of entitlement every time I feel inadequate, or passed over, or under-acknowledged. Fairness does matter. But only up to a point. And what matters more, what coheres with the ways of God, is that generosity of spirit whose real delight is that everyone flourish and belong equally, and the realization that I don't have to secure my existence or worth comparatively, as if we're competing with each other for being or for love, as if these are limited commodities.

I've said that if this Season of Creation is about fostering our connection with and care for the natural world, then coming to grips more fully with our human nature is an essential part of the work. It seems to me that this parable reveals something deeply wired. A tendency to envy and comparison that gets in the way of relatedness and contentment; that draws us away from open-heartedness and generosity towards habits of grasping and dissatisfaction. Indigenous and other community minded cultures seem to encourage a healthier relationship to this aspect of our nature; it's moderated by a sense of the sharedness of life, the wisdom of elders and living spiritual practice. By contrast, a culture such as ours seems to intensify and indeed exploit this feature of the human operating system, actively fostering competitiveness, a sense of entitlement and insatiability. And the consequences are world-destroying.

Jesus said: 'the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire labourers for his vineyard', and who then returned and returned and returned so that each might live. This is how God is; it's what life on earth could be. And I wonder, what might it mean for us to seek more consciously to create and

⁴ Williams, *On Christian Theology*, p.41.

live from *this* kingdom culture in the contexts we are – in our schools, offices, businesses and families. What might it look like to be drawn from envy to generosity, at every level of our being; to live, not from a sense of scarcity and entitlement, but delighting in the givingness of God? And as we imagine this transfiguration of our own natures and of the communities and systems we build, can you hear, as I do, that sigh of relief from the world?