



Preaching Generosity

Sunday 24 September 2023

Some notes for a sermon from the lectionary

Choose and adapt any elements that are helpful for your context - a 5 or 10 minute talk, or an illustration or quote for a longer sermon. Some visual ideas that could support an all-age talk are included, along with suggested prayers.

Exodus 16.2-15 ~ Matthew 20.1-16 ~ Philippians 1.21-30 ~ Psalm 105.1-6, 37-45

As Generosity Week begins, the lectionary readings point us to the extraordinary, gracious generosity of God – and in that light, to be challenged about our own often grumpy response.

Imagine siblings comparing presents under the Christmas tree. One spots a beautifully wrapped parcel of shoebox size - and their name is on it! What generous giver has given them this lovely gift? They can't WAIT to open it!

Now the second looks to find their gift. They can't find it under the tree - because it's too big! It's hidden behind the sofa... and it's the size of a bike. Sibling one's gratefulness begins to fade.

Some of us might find [this 90 second clip](#) of a fairness experiment with capuchin monkeys a little too recognisable. As Kenneth E Bailey puts it “Grace [we might call it generosity, unearned gift] is not only amazing, it is also – for certain types – infuriating” (his emphasis)*.



So, how will we respond to the gracious generosity of God? With gratitude or grumbling? Complaint, confusion - or a desire to copy? Will we hold back, or will we follow?

"Are you envious because I am generous?"

Today's gospel reading (Matthew 20.1-16) is often titled something like “the labourers in the vineyard”. Kenneth E Bailey prefers to point to the character of the master, calling it “The Parable of the Compassionate Employer”*. FW Beare calls the master “the Eccentric Employer”**. The employment practices of the vineyard owner are certainly counter-cultural.

Firstly, he gets involved. Despite the fact that he has a steward or foreman, he himself goes “against the expectations of his class” (Bailey), walking from the vineyard to the marketplace 5 times in one day. This is the place where day labourers – a vulnerable group without steady employment – gather in the hope of picking up casual work.

*Bailey, Kenneth (2008), *Jesus through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels*. SPCK Publishing

**Beare, FW (1981), *The Gospel According to Matthew: a Commentary*. Blackwells.



As Zambian commentator Joe Kapolyo notes “This practice was typical in the Middle East then and now; and is still common in many parts of the world. In Zambian towns, many young men and women still gather outside the local labour offices early in the morning. Prospective employers come there to recruit casual labourers on a daily basis.”***

Local to me in South London today, if you head to B&Q at a weekend, you’ll often find people in the car park offering their services as painters, plumbers or joiners.

Then and now, the position is extremely vulnerable. It might be the only option available to those without land, the ‘foreigners, the fatherless and the widows’ for whom the Deuteronomic practices of leaving fruit for gleaners were set out (and which we see practiced by Jesus’ ancestors in the book of Ruth).

The landowner or master doesn’t stay apart from this group but repeatedly goes to them.

Secondly, he keeps on hiring! You’d expect a vineyard owner to know how much labour was needed and to hire everyone needed at daybreak. He wouldn’t need to return for extras - and certainly not 5 times! But this owner goes back, again and again.

We might imagine those looking for work becoming increasingly anxious and desperate as the day proceeds – how will they provide for themselves and their families today? Why does the vineyard owner keep returning? He’s not hiring to get his work done. He’s hiring to give dignity, provision, and purpose to people whose circumstances are precarious and impoverished.

Thirdly, he’s generous beyond expectation. A denarius is a day’s wage. This is what someone needs to live on for the day.

He’s promised he’ll pay those who’ve worked fewer hours ‘what is right’ - they’ve trustingly given their labour on this basis, without shaking hands on a particular sum. In strict employment terms, he could reasonably have given those who’ve worked fewer hours a fraction of the amount.

But he gives to every labourer what they need – a day’s wage. He has gone beyond a worldly definition of ‘fairness’ to generosity and grace. These vulnerable workers will go home with enough for their daily bread.

HOWEVER – he’s generous in ways that are too much for some!

At paycheque time, notice the order in which he recompenses the workers. He could begin by paying those who were first hired, saving himself and his steward the grumbling that follows. Instead, he starts with the most recently hired - so everyone sees what’s going on.

If we’re honest, most of us might have some sympathy with those who are paid last. They’ve laboured for a whole day in the sun and now they see those who have worked a fraction of the time paid the same. I feel a bit like a capuchin monkey at this point.

Jesus has a lesson to teach us about our character, as well as the character of God. His generosity doesn’t reflect contract law or worldly definitions of fairness. It goes above and beyond – and invites us to rethink generosity too.



*** Kapolyo, Joe (2010) ‘Matthew’, in Adeyemo, Tokunboh, *Africa Bible Commentary*. Zondervan

“You will know that I am the Lord your God”

Our Exodus reading sets us in the stark light of the wilderness. In this exposing environment, one aspect of human character is shown pretty clearly - in the 14 verses of today's reading, the word 'grumble' or 'complain' is used 7 times. But God's character is more brilliantly illuminated. He miraculously and generously provides what His people need. Humans grumble - but **God gives**.

God doesn't give because His people have earned it, or have asked in the "right" way. He gives because this is His character.

Back in the memory of this people, Abraham set a marker, a line in the sand, declaring “**the Lord will provide**” (Genesis 22.14). This is not incidental to God's character, but fundamental, a way in which God's people can recognise Him. Moses says in today's reading (v8) “**You will know** that it was the Lord when he gives you meat to eat... and all the bread you want.” The Lord tells them “you will eat meat and bread... And then **you will know** that I am the Lord your God”. **God is recognisable by His generosity**.

The Lord sets out how he will provide for them – the ridiculous, extraordinary arrival of bread from heaven. What could show more abundance and provision than food falling out of the sky?! This is our **God!**

As we come **to break bread at the Lord's table**, we both remember and experience God's nourishing presence and liberating power. We might pray: "Wise and gracious God, you spread a table before us; nourish your people with the word of life and the bread of heaven."



This QR code links to a communion service specially prepared for Generosity Week by the Church of England.

"Live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ"

How do we respond to God's generosity? The letter to the Philippians compels the readers “live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ.” How can we respond in a 'worthy' way to God's extraordinary grace to us?

Paul is writing from prison and yet with abundant joy. He has experienced the overwhelming love and welcome of Christ and nothing will ever be the same for him. Jesus met Paul with transforming love when he was far from Him, persecuting His church. This is God's way as we will remember in the Eucharist: while we were still far off, He met us in His Son and brought us home.



Now, for Paul, to live is Christ. His plans and possessions, purposes and priorities are all now for the One who gave everything for him.

This response of gratitude is in tune with the psalmist, inviting us to tell, remember and praise God for “all his wonderful works” (Psalm 105.2, 5).

So, what about us? What does a grateful, generous response to God's grace look like for us as a church? How do we reflect God's generosity as individuals and together, living as children of a generous God?

Giving financially, cheerfully and generously, to God's work, is part of how we are invited to respond to the generosity of God. *It could be helpful to set out the ways in which people can give at your church – draw attention to any leaflets or information.*

As one response, leading into next week, hand out small circles of paper. Invite people to write one thing every day that they have received from God – a practice of thanksgiving, like going out for manna. They can bring the manna they have collected back next week, when the service will be focussed on gratitude.

Some participative ideas (from givinggrace.org)

For all ages, or for all adults! (see more ideas [here](#))



What is it?

The mysterious bread from heaven was called 'Manna' which, in Hebrew, sounds like 'what is it?' Play a game of 'What is it?' with volunteers from the congregation!

Prepare a number of food items in opaque containers. Make sure there are enough items for every child to have a chance to take part. Blindfold the child and invite them to guess what is in the box/bag. Ideas might include oranges, cheese, chocolate, cooked peas or rice, bread (children really like the idea of something with potential to be gross – so feeling a bag of squashed peas and trying to guess is fun!).

Talk about foods that they like and foods they think they hate! But if there were no food at all – what then? Talk about the manna that was provided for the Israelites by God as a reminder that they should trust God for everything. It's more difficult for us to remember because we can get so much so easily. But we give thanks, and think about how we can use what we have wisely.

Exploring the

Scriptures:

Plenty for everyone

Present these stories as a news story (or you could invite some young people to re-imagine the events as a Twitter thread or Facebook wall conversation) (A script can be found in the link above).

Enough is enough game.

Divide the congregation into teams and play the game in four rounds. In each, give the teams one minute to shout out as many answers as they can think of to the question given. The team with the most correct guesses wins the round.

Name 10 food items that were rationed or restricted in the UK during World War 2:

Bacon, Butter, Sugar, Cheese, Eggs, Cooking Fat, Tea, Sweets, Jam, Cereals

Name the top 10 food items in a supermarket basket in the current decade:

Fizzy drinks, Milk, Crisps, Cheese, Cornflakes, Coffee, Wine, Biscuits, Bread Rolls, Pasta

Name 10 foods that were on the menu for athletes at the 2012 Olympics:

Lamb, Clotted Cream, Hummus, Olives, Pitta Bread, Eggs, Porridge, Strawberries, Burgers, Rice

Name 10 things that are given as essential supplies by relief agencies for refugees or those displaced by natural disasters:

Blankets, Water purifying tablets, Mosquito nets, Flour, Oil, Rice, Sugar, Milk powder, Eggs, Cereal

When all the rounds have been completed, invite the groups to talk about the lists and the differences between them.

Collect

Almighty God our heavenly Father,
you are bountiful in your love for us
and shower us generously with all that we need.
By your grace give us generous hearts
that we may declare your goodness
and offer our lives back to you in thankful worship.
for the sake of him who came among us as
your gift of love, your Son Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen

Lord, your provision is generous,
but we are envious of others;
Lord, have mercy. **Lord, have mercy.**
Jesus, we are unmindful of all
that you give us and are not content
with what we have;
Christ, have mercy. **Christ, have mercy.**
Lord, our narrow spirits cramp our growth,
when we fail to be thankful;
Lord, have mercy. **Lord, have mercy.**
May Almighty God have mercy on us, forgive us our sins,
and bring us to everlasting life. **Amen.**