

Daily Prayer

Feria

Wednesday, August 19, 2020

We enter into a time of quiet. We offer to God our selves and in the silence know that God embraces us as God's very own. We offer to God our hopes and our concerns through our prayers and in the silence listen for God. Today we hold in our prayers the ordinary moments in life—the trials and the joys.

We begin by saying

Grace to you and peace from God our Father
and the Lord Jesus Christ

Philippians 1.2

The First Reading

The word of the LORD came to me: Mortal, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel: prophesy, and say to them—to the shepherds: Thus says the Lord GOD: Ah, you shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fatlings; but you do not feed the sheep. You have not strengthened the weak, you have not healed the sick, you have not bound up the injured, you have not brought back the strayed, you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled them. So they were scattered, because there was no shepherd; and scattered, they became food for all the wild animals. My sheep were scattered, they wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill; my sheep were scattered over all the face of the earth, with no one to search or seek for them.

Therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the LORD: As I live, says the Lord GOD, because my sheep have become a prey, and my sheep have become food for all the wild animals, since there was

no shepherd; and because my shepherds have not searched for my sheep, but the shepherds have fed themselves, and have not fed my sheep; therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the LORD: Thus says the Lord GOD, I am against the shepherds; and I will demand my sheep at their hand, and put a stop to their feeding the sheep; no longer shall the shepherds feed themselves. I will rescue my sheep from their mouths, so that they may not be food for them. For thus says the Lord GOD: I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out.

Ezekiel 34.1-11

The Psalm

The Lord is my shepherd; *
I shall not be in want.

He makes me lie down in green pastures *
and leads me beside still waters.

He revives my soul *
and guides me along right pathways for his name's sake.

Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I shall fear no evil; *
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff, they comfort me.

You spread a table before me in the presence of those
who trouble me; *
you have anointed my head with oil,
and my cup is running over.

Surely your goodness and mercy shall follow me all the
days of my life, *
and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.

Psalm 23

The Gospel Reading

We continue with the gospel reading and the reflection that follows. In silence, we ask what the readings have to say to us today. Is there something in the reflection that draws us more deeply into the reading? What does God have to say to us? What do we have to ask God?

‘For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire labourers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the labourers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. When he went out about nine o’clock, he saw others standing idle in the market-place; and he said to them, “You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.” So they went. When he went out again about noon and about three o’clock, he did the same. And about five o’clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, “Why are you standing here idle all day?” They said to him, “Because no one has hired us.” He said to them, “You also go into the vineyard.” When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, “Call the labourers 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. And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, saying, “These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.” But he replied to one of them, “Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?” So the last will be first, and the first will be last.’

Matthew 20.1-16a

The Reflection

Paul MacLean

These are two very potent readings, and both have an uncanny relevance to our times. The passage from Ezekiel is an indictment of leadership in a time of crisis. Instead of caring for their people the leaders of Israel look after themselves, just as in some countries today leaders have not put the health of their citizens first and foremost, and have taken actions that put money in the pockets of the people and corporations that need it least. And of course the virus is more prevalent in poorer populations. The effects of the pandemic have gone beyond a health crisis to exacerbating the vast divide between the rich and the poor, the haves and the have nots.

We know this is wrong, but before we move from Ezekiel's condemnation, note the vision of leadership on which it is founded. Leaders are shepherds who care for and protect the flock as their primary focus. It's an image that is used over and over again in the OT and by Jesus, to portray the relationship between God and God's people, and the responsibility of leaders. In Jesus the image is developed into the model we now call servant leadership. When we call our leaders to account, this is the standard we should be using.

If we were to use today's language to critique the behaviour of Israel's leaders in the time of Ezekiel, we would probably not talk of sheep and greedy shepherds, but of corrupt politics and the economy. And in the Gospel reading we are presented with the language of economics and a conundrum that goes against all our ideas of fairness and reward for labour.

I don't know about you, but I would have been outraged to have been one of the early workers who put in a solid day's labour only to find that the guys who came late to the job were paid just as

much. Is this really what the Kingdom of Heaven is like? It seems like a recipe for dissatisfaction and chaos, or for a grievance to be taken up by the union to the heavenly boss.

Before we start to explain the parable and domesticate it so that it becomes more acceptable, I think we need to stick with the outrage a bit. Why are we so upset? It seems to challenge a basic assumption of society, both then and now, that we should be rewarded in proportion to our own efforts and abilities. And yet, note the explanation of those still hanging around the town square: 'Why are you idle?' 'No one has hired us.' In other words, the fault is not with the individual workers that they have been lazy, but with the work itself, the lack of economic opportunity. And the owner of the vineyard sees this and does not take advantage by hiring cheap labour.

At the heart of this parable, as with many, is God's superabundance of grace. Gift. Generosity. More than we can ask or imagine. Take for another example the parable of sower, where some of the seed that falls on good ground produces 30, 60 or 100 fold. Now, I'm writing this in some of the most fertile countryside in Canada, and even with miracle fertilizers, there is no way that any wheat is going to produce like that. Jesus' farmers would have been just as shocked by that parable of the sower as we are by the workers in the vineyard. Jesus' parables generally have this shock or outrage to them - a challenge to our most basic assumptions. And the challenge is to take into ourselves grace, gift, generosity.

The workers in the vineyard parable is often interpreted as being a message to the church, to say that through God's grace we are all equal members, no matter if we have been members since birth or have first come through the doors (or a Zoom portal) in the past few weeks. We don't earn God's love. Love is a gift, open to all, which

we receive with thankful hearts, both for ourselves and for everyone else in our community. This is a perfectly valid application of the parable. However, I think we should also veer back to the original setting of the parable, which is social and economic. It's not after all an allegory for the life of the church, but a story told to make people uncomfortable about economic conditions.

So, our time of crisis is making us very uncomfortable right now, and bringing to light some major inequities. We have been inexorably creating a society with an ever widening gap between haves and have nots. The so-called 'middle income' neighbourhoods in Toronto have shrunk from 67% to about 25%, reflecting that increasingly people are either rich or poor in Canada's largest city. And this of course is replicated across the country. What has been revealed by the virus is that our society depends upon mostly poorly paid people for its safe and healthy functioning - long term care and other health workers, grocery staff, delivery people, hospitality workers to name just a few. We know the phrases that describe the reality of so many of our citizens: precarious work, gig economy.

How can we create a more equal and just society? The parable of the workers in the vineyard has never been more relevant. The issue is to give everyone what they need to live full and healthy lives in community. Or as Jesus puts it, 'I have come that they might have life, and have it abundantly.' What is being talked about now is the idea of a basic income for everyone to meet the necessities of life, to put us all on an equal footing. Or alternatively, targeted programs such as universal daycare and a revamped employment insurance that will achieve some of the same goals.

Much of the opposition to these ideas boils down to the outrage and resistance we (I sometimes include myself) intuitively feel to those who haven't been picking grapes for nearly as long as we

have, but getting the same wages at the end of the day. 'They don't deserve it!' And of course, where is the money coming from, but from our taxes. And we don't want to raise those.

However, the key 'take away' of the parable of the workers in the vineyard is that the boss cares about everyone equally, even those standing idle, and this care trumps the feelings of individual workers about fairness, even when those feelings are quite understandable. It also says that wages are a gift, not something we somehow have by right - who is to say, for example, that a federal judge should be paid 20 times more than the long term care worker who looks after his or her aged mother? (Federal judges can earn a top salary of \$400,000, whereas long term care workers may be paid minimum wage and earn as little as \$20,000. This is simply one example of the pervasive income disparity in our society.) Where is the justice and fairness in that? God cares for the whole flock of sheep. And good leaders will have a similar care.

This is what the Kingdom of Heaven is like.

To be clear, I don't think Jesus was creating an allegory to justify specifically a basic minimum wage. But I do think he was telling a parable about the universal generosity of God that challenges our ideas of a just society and economy. We pray every day that 'your Kingdom come on earth as in heaven'. And now is a critical time when harmful injustices and inequalities have been laid bare by the pandemic. It is the time to take that prayer seriously, and to take some radical steps towards caring for all the sheep and running an equitable vineyard (that will also produce some excellent wines).

When the time is right, we conclude our time of silence with the canticle

The Canticle ~ A Song of Joy

O be joyful in the Lord, all the earth; ♦
serve the Lord with gladness
and come before his presence with a song.

Know that the Lord is God; ♦
it is he that has made us and we are his;
we are his people and the sheep of his pasture.

Enter his gates with thanksgiving
and his courts with praise; ♦
give thanks to him and bless his name.

For the Lord is gracious; his steadfast love is everlasting, ♦
and his faithfulness endures from generation to
generation.

Psalm 100

*We continue in prayer for those people and situations that we hold up before God (The Intercessions)
and continue with the concluding collect, the Lord's prayer and the closing sentences.*

The Intercessions

Let us pray to the Lord,
who is our refuge and stronghold.

For the health and well-being of our nation,
that all who are fearful and anxious
may be at peace and free from worry:
Lord, hear us, Lord, graciously hear us.

For the isolated and housebound,
that we may be alert to their needs,
and care for them in their vulnerability:
Lord, hear us, Lord, graciously hear us.

For our homes and families,
our schools and young people,
and all in any kind of need or distress:
Lord, hear us, Lord, graciously hear us.

For a blessing on our local community,
that our neighbourhoods may be places of trust and friendship,
where all are known and cared for:
Lord, hear us, Lord, graciously hear us.

We commend ourselves, and all for whom we pray,
to the mercy and protection of God.
Merciful Father,
accept these prayers
for the sake of your Son,
our Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

We conclude our prayers

Almighty God,
you have broken the tyranny of sin
and sent into our hearts the Spirit of your Son.
Give us grace to dedicate our freedom to your service,
that all people may know the glorious liberty
of the children of God;
through Jesus Christ our Lord,
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever. Amen.

[let us pray as our Saviour taught us,]

Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.

Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins,
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Save us from the time of trial,
and deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power,
and the glory are yours,
now and for ever. Amen

We conclude

May God grant to the world justice, truth and peace.
Amen. Alleluia.

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