

Sermon to St James' Church, King Street, Sydney

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Rector of St James

Pentecost 16

(a-os25)

24 September 2017

Readings: Exodus 16:2-15; Psalm 105: 1-6, 37-45;
Philippians 1: 21-30 Matthew 20: 1-16.

'Waltzing the Underdog'

"The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. The Israelites said to them, "If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger." (Exodus 16: 2-15)

The people of God grumbled about their circumstances and God responded with a generosity beyond their expectations. The workers in the vineyard all received the standard wage for their toil and those that worked longest grumbled because others received the same. In the early church, the Jewish believers grumbled because the newcomer Gentiles received the same status in the Kingdom of God as those of the ancient 'chosen race'.

Whenever our lives are shaped around money, status and power, (or, at least, our belief in the lack of it), we will always have something to grumble at if we believe that others are getting a better deal than us. It is part of our human nature, part of our culture that is obsessed with materiality rather than spirituality.

Cultures of Complaint and Entitlement

The late uncle of our current Prime Minister's wife, Lucy Turnbull, was the art critic and writer Robert Hughes. He is especially remembered for his history of early Australia titled *The Fatal Shore*. Another significant book of his was *The Culture of Complaint*, published in 1993. Reviewer, Scott London, described the book this way:

Hughes describes what he sees as "a hollowness at the cultural core of contemporary American life... The polity has become obsessed with therapies and filled with distrust of formal politics; sceptical of authority and prey to superstition; its political language corroded by fake pity and euphemism." It

conjures up images of Rome in the final stages of cultural and political decay, he observes. As ambition and ingenuity are left behind, what remains is a sickly Culture of Complaint. The "fraying of America" has come about as a result of excessive polarization and politicization, according to Hughes."

(Scott London, Review, 1995)

Although relating to America, Hughes' criticism bites broadly, deeply, and carries a prophetic edge to it as we look at the current state of politics in Australia and much of the rest of the world. Many people are polarised on a range of political issues, grumbling about the 'failure of our political elites', or the issues of 'same sex marriage', or 'climate change', or 'environmental protection', or 'employment policy'. Moreover, much of the political debate seems to have been captured by the extremes of the commentariat, rather than a moderate, rational, and conciliatory middle-ground.

The result of this behaviour has been a general disengagement from the mainstream political process, resulting in an astounding development, and that is less than one half of a percent of people in Australia (that is around 100,000 people) are members of any type of political party – which makes the churches look good!

This situation has made the development of reasonable public policy almost impossible for there is little desire among our political warriors for compromise. Indeed, and the political parties seem to be more interested in scoring points off each other and retaining some semblance of power instead of making good decisions for the benefit of all.

The 'culture of complaint' that Hughes identifies is the inclination of people to blame others for the challenges they face in life, such that they compete to claim the status of 'victim' or 'under-dog', while at the same time having a little desire to engage with others in an effort to find a solution or work for the common good.

Closely allied to the 'culture of complaint' is the 'culture of entitlement', which is a belief that one is deserving of or entitled to certain privileges - especially from the government. This has played into the political process such that voters and businesses want 'financial incentives' for either their vote or cooperation. This again becomes a distraction from good policy-making, and has a proven potential for corruption. But I digress.

The Magic Pudding

So, back to the Israelites in the Wilderness. Having made their complaint and affirmed their entitlement, God provided for their needs by sending meat and bread - and they had more than they could eat. For this the people of God were truly grateful, believing that God had indeed chosen them for great things, as Psalm 105 suggests.

The metaphor here is that in God's world there is abundance and therefore no one will go hungry. It reminds me of that great Australian children's story, *The Magic Pudding*, which proved to be a prophetic critique of Australian consumerism. The story of the pudding centres around its capacity to renew itself while it is being eaten such that you never run out. Thus, out comes Bill Barnacle's famous line "The more you eats the more you gets!" It was similar for the Israelites in the Wilderness when God provided for the needs of his people, even without their need for work.

In the Gospel reading, (and in defiance of any sense of the fair-work legislation), Jesus' told a story of some vineyard workers who had only worked a couple of hours but received the same day's pay (a denarius) as those who had worked from dawn to dusk. Unsurprisingly, the day-long workers were indignant at the situation.

Of course, we understand the parable to be an analogy for salvation, and that it is never too late to be welcomed into the Kingdom of God and receive its benefits. God desires to relate to us and therefore makes every effort to keep the doors open such that the late-comers receive the same reward as those who have been there for the long-haul. There is resonance between this and the Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11–32).

The reality is, however, that while this may be the ideal, nevertheless be it the toilers in the vineyard or the older son who stayed with his father when the younger one ran off to enjoy himself, we humans tend to major on indignation rather than grace. So, we are deep down inside not so keen on the first being last or the last first – just watch the behaviour when people are lining up for a drink at a bar and someone pushes in at the front!

The first will be last and the last will be first is a refrain through this section of Matthew's Gospel. The previous passage was about the rich young man who could not give up his possessions to follow Jesus. The passage after the workers in the vineyard is about the mother of James and John who sought special places of honour for her sons in the Kingdom of God – thereby demonstrating for us the eternal sense of entitlement.

The Grace of God

The parable of the vineyard workers is not a story about running a business or alternative economic policy. Instead, it is about the grace of God which is to be experienced in abundance. It is therefore difficult to evaluate the parable in terms of procedural fairness because it is actually about God's unconditional love. 'Love is love'; you can't measure it, own it, or control it, it just is there – manifesting itself through relationships.

It is astounding how people want more as soon as they hear of someone receiving more favourable terms than they have - that is the culture of entitlement. Jesus, however, taught that we should be content with what God has given us and not be jealous when it seems that someone is getting a better deal.

In the world's eyes, it wasn't fair for the labourers who had worked the whole day to get only as much as those who had worked a couple of hours; but that is the offence and shock of the parable. Parables need that element to get our attention. The story contrasts our worldly politics based on power, status and wealth with the rule of God, which is based on abundant grace available for all.

Grace is the key to unlocking the kingdom, and inside we will discover a world of acceptance, equity, integrity and empowerment, where people are not victims. So, the first will be last and the last first, for all are welcome equally into God's kingdom (both saint and sinner), an idea that may be both a shock and an offence to those religious 'keepers of the law' who seek to divide the community and exclude people from God's presence.