

Sermon 20 September 2020 – Need not Greed

The theme for this third week in our season of creation is need not greed. I think we all share the same desire for our needs to be met. I think many times we think, and sometimes voice, the feeling that if only there was not so much greed in the world then everyone's needs would be met. It really is heart breaking to see the large number of people whose basic needs of food and shelter are not met while a minority of people live in luxury.

Our readings today very clearly show us – remind us - that God provides for the needs of all people. In fact, for all creation. If this is truly the case, why then are there people who have little to nothing - who are exploited – while others seem to have such an abundance? Why then are the earth's resources being depleted?

Both the Exodus and the Gospel readings challenge our sense of proportion when it comes to having our needs fulfilled. Just what, or how much, is enough, or too much? Where do we draw the line between need and greed? And who determines where the line is drawn? You see, for someone sitting at the side of the road, being hired for a day may be enough to meet their needs. Whereas, being permanently employed with a steady income may not be enough for someone who has their eye on a lucrative government tender.

In the Exodus reading today, we see the Israelites have barely begun to enjoy their freedom from slavery when they start to grumble and complain against Moses, Aaron and God. In v3, they say, "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." What short memories they have. They certainly did not sit by the fleshpots and eat their fill of bread in Egypt. They were slaves and lived in terrible conditions. God's response to their complaining is to provide them with food – manna from heaven. In v12 God says to Moses, "I have heard the complaining of the Israelites; say to them, 'At twilight you shall eat meat, and in the morning you shall have your fill of bread; then you shall know that I am the Lord your God.'" And so God provides manna from heaven and God says that there's enough to go around. The Israelites are only to take what you need for the day. Through God's action, the Israelites have to learn to trust in God and God's generosity. They have to learn not to hoard what God gives them. As long as each one takes what they need, and no-one hoards there will be enough. In Exodus 16, which was not part of today's reading, we see how, as each person gathered food in the wilderness - whether they gathered much or little - each had enough. However, some did not follow God's instructions and hoarded the food they did not eat, and it became rotten. We too

need to learn to trust in God and God's generosity and to remember that our greed often leads to waste.

The Psalmist recounts the glorious and wonderful deeds of God. The psalm reminds, and calls, us to remember to seek the lord and his strength. To seek his presence continually and to remember God's wonderful works. Yes, we do this when we worship and give thanks and praise to God. When we appreciate all that God has provided. When we recognise that in many instances we are better off than many other people are. However, when we compare ourselves to others who have more, we so easily fall into the trap of complaining and then what we have is not enough. This is when we start to focus on our lack rather than our plenty.

A familiar sight to many of us are the men we see gathered at the side of the road. On street corners. Outside places like Builder's Warehouse. Waiting, hoping to be hired. Hoping to earn some money in order to feed their families. Some are there from very early in the morning until very late in the afternoon. As the day progresses, hope begins to fade for those who have not been hired. Some are willing to settle for anything – R50 for a day's labour even. Some will go back home empty-handed. Having spent a day in the sun. Doing nothing and having nothing to show for it. This sounds very much like the story told in our Gospel reading today.

A story that in many ways may not sit very well with us. It offends our sense of fairness and justice. It is the story about a landowner who seems to behave in the strangest of ways. He begins by hiring men early in the morning to work in his vineyard. He agrees with them to pay them the "usual daily wage" - a denarius. Now a denarius may not have been a living wage but it was an acceptable one. The fact that there is a minimum wage does not mean people are not exploited. However, it is an agreed amount between employer and employee. And this is the case between the land owner and the workers he hires first. Biblical scholar Obery Hendricks notes, that a denarius was just about enough to keep the workers coming back for another day of work so that they could (perhaps) survive to work another day (Season of creation Year A: Canon Janet Trisk). This acceptable daily wage could be compared, I suppose, to the contentious minimum wage in our country. It is the very least that is needed to survive and it is not necessarily fair and just. The story goes on to tell us that at various times during the day the landowner hires other workers – at 9am, at noon, at 3pm and again at 5pm in the afternoon - right up to one hour before quitting time. When he hires these workers he tells them he will pay them "whatever is right." He does not sit down and agree on an amount as he did with the first group. He simply says to these that he will do whatever is right. At quitting time, the landowner tells his foreman to pay the

workers, starting with the ones who were hired last. And we see that not only does he pay the workers he hired last, first. He also pays them the same wage as those he hired first. No matter how long they had worked, each worker is paid the same amount. Surely, this cannot be right. No wonder the workers who worked the full day complain. This action just shouts “not fair”, “unjust”. And I think this is our issue with this story. I believe this is what makes it difficult for us to accept. We are used to Jesus behaving in a just manner, looking out for the poor, the weak and the outcast. All of these men were in need of work. They had probably fallen on hard times and in fact possibly lost their own land. And this is certainly something we know about as a result of COVID-19. We know many who have lost jobs and homes, and may even have experienced it personally. But, this story is not about our sense of “fairness” and “justice.” It is about God’s grace and generosity and, yes, even about God’s justice. You see the landowner reminds them that he paid them what they agreed to work for. He did not “do them in”. He kept his agreement with them.

It is by grace and generosity that the workers are offered the opportunity to work and are able to earn a living – to be provided for. This is what lies at the heart of this story. God’s grace and generosity in opening the kingdom of heaven to all – not just the Jewish people, but the poor, the weak, the outcasts and Gentiles alike. And maybe, just maybe, this is a lesson we too have to learn. That people outside the traditional structures of the church can experience the love and generosity of God as much as those of us who are within its walls.

Initially those hired first were happy to do the work at the wage offered. It provided them with a sense of security and peace of mind that they would be able to go home and feed their families on that particular day. They had been hired. They were blessed and thankful. If you just think back to the Exodus story that is exactly what God’s provision for the Israelites was all about. He told them to gather only what they needed for one day. Not to take more. Not to hoard. Only to take what was provided and required for one day. The wage that these workers were paid was a wage that would provide for one day. And so they accept it. At least until the end of the day. Because that is when they see what the others received. That is when they compare themselves to the others and then believe that what they have is not enough. Whatever joy they had is now stripped away because of their own comparison. Their own jealousy and envy.

The lesson for us is that we can experience more joy, be more content ... when we let go of measuring what we have against what someone else has. Rev. Chris Furr says the only time we should look in our neighbours bowl is to make sure they have

enough. Not to see if we have as much as they do. I will repeat what Rev. Chris Furr says, the only time we should look in our neighbours bowl is to make sure they have enough. Not to see if we have as much as they do.

Consumerism - which in many instances is leading to the depletion of the earth's resources - is built on selfish desires for more and more, which is itself rooted in the fear of not having enough. Jesus shows us how to live generous lives. He calls us to different. To love and to restore. This, I believe, is what Paul is saying in the Philippians reading today when he says we are called to live lives "in a manner worthy of the Gospel of Christ..."(Philippians 1: 27). When we stop grumbling, complaining, comparing and counting. When we focus on our plenty instead of our lack. When we share generously and do not hoard. When we care for creation and the earth's resources. Then we are indeed living lives "in a manner worthy of the Gospel."

May we never be envious because God is generous. May we rejoice and praise God for God's mercy to others as well as to ourselves. May our behaviour reflect a God who is the source of love and grace and abundant generosity. And in the words of the hymn we sang earlier, I pray, Lord, end our madness, carelessness, greed; make us content with the things that we need.

Amen