



A sermon for the Cathedral Eucharist at Wells Cathedral, preached on Sunday 20 September by the Very Reverend Toby Wright, Dean of Wells.

Wild generosity

May my words be faithful to the written word and may the written word lead us to the Living Word, Jesus the merciful One. Amen.

Last week, we reflected on being forgiven so that we might fear no more and learn to forgive. Today, Jesus takes us deeper still on the journey of wisdom. For even when forgiveness is given, when guilt has been lifted, fear begins to loosen its grip and we live out a forgiveness of others, another danger remains: comparison.¹

The labourers believe they have been treated unfairly: yet they have received exactly what was promised. Their suffering comes from seeing someone else blessed and they are jealous. That is one of the profound insights of Jesus' parable, found only in Matthew's Gospel. Human beings often struggle less with our own circumstances than with somebody else's apparent advantage. You've all seen it if you've ever watched children eat together – '*she's got less peas*'; '*he's got more ice-cream*'!

But Grace begins when we cease keeping count. The first workers turn blessing into grievance because they measure themselves against their neighbours rather than against the generosity of the master. And this is a challenge.

Modern psychology has repeatedly observed something similar as researchers speak of *social comparison theory*:² we do not assess our lives objectively, but comparatively. We judge our success, our happiness and worth against those around us.

The first workers are therefore deeply human- if we are honest, they are you and me. They are not angry at their wage; but they are angry at the wage of the others. And Jesus asks the unsettling question, literally: '*Is your eye evil because I am good?*'

¹ CS Lewis *Mere Christianity*, "Pride gets no pleasure out of having something, only out of having more of it than the next man... It is the comparison that makes you proud."

² Leon Festinger's Paper *A Theory of Social Comparison Processes* is a key text from 1954, but more recently the work of Joanne Wood (1989). *Theory and Research Concerning Social Comparisons of Personal Attributes*. *Psychological Bulletin*, 106(2), 231-248.

The ancient world understood the 'evil eye' as more than superstition. It was a way of describing the tendency of the human heart to resent someone else flourishing. The evil eye cannot enjoy its own blessings because it is preoccupied with someone else's. Neuroscience offers us an intriguing parallel. Brain imaging studies suggest that social exclusion, unfairness and status threats activate some of the same neural pathways associated with physical pain. We are, quite literally, wired to notice relative standing.

Yet the Kingdom of God is precisely the interruption of that ancient survival logic. For the Kingdom is not an economy of scarcity. The labourers assume that if the last have received more than expected, then somehow the first must have received less. But grace is not a finite commodity³. God's goodness is not diminished by being shared. God's love is not a cake from which each slice leaves less for everybody else.

This is why envy is so spiritually corrosive. Other sins seek to acquire something, whilst envy seeks to take joy away. As Søren Kierkegaard observed, envy is the unhappy admiration of another⁴, or to put it another way it is sorrow at another person's good.

And it is becoming increasingly difficult to resist. In our current age, we inhabit an age of continual comparison. Social media places before our eyes an endless procession of curated success, achievement, beauty and influence. We are shown the highlights of thousands of lives and invited to compare them with the ordinary reality of our own. Is it any wonder that psychologists speak of growing epidemics of anxiety, inadequacy, hopelessness and isolation? The old language of the 'evil eye' suddenly feels remarkably modern. The eye becomes incapable of wonder, because it has become addicted to comparison.

But in our gospel today, Jesus offers us a different way. Notice that the landowner repeatedly goes out looking for workers. At the crack of dawn, nine o'clock, noon, three o'clock and five o'clock. The focus of the parable is not really on wages but on the extraordinary persistence of the landowner. God keeps going out, to seek and invite.

The astonishing truth is not that the latecomers were paid so much, it is that nobody was forgotten. This theme runs through Scripture: it lies behind Jonah's anger at Nineveh. We see it behind the elder brother's resentment in the parable of the Prodigal Son. And again, behind the complaint of the vineyard workers. Again and again, people discover that God is more generous than they expected or can cope with.

³ Karl Barth spoke of 'eternal, free and unchanging grace' Church Dogmatics II/2.

⁴ "Envy is secret admiration. An admirer who feels that he cannot become happy by abandoning himself to it chooses to be envious of that which he admires... Admiration is happy self-surrender; envy is unhappy self-assertion." *The Sickness unto Death* 1849.

When Thomas Aquinas defines envy, he points out that it is not simply a wanting what another possesses, but a sorrow at another's good because it appears to lessen our own excellence⁵. That is precisely the condition of the first labourers. They are not hurt by injustice. Rather, they grieve because another's good fortune seems to diminish their status.

In his thought, Aquinas reminds us that this is based upon a fundamental error about the nature of God. God is not a limited good distributed in portions: God is infinite being and infinite goodness⁶. Therefore, God's generosity towards another can never impoverish me. For us as Christians, knowing our forgiveness and free from fear, we then see another person's growth in goodness, and are able to increase our joy, not reduce it, because we participate together in the one divine life.

The labourers imagine a world of scarcity; whilst the Kingdom reveals a reality of superabundance. Now the challenge of this is that it is much harder to believe that God loves our enemies with the same intensity. Yet the Gospel insists that God's mercy cannot be hoarded by the respectable, the religious, the early starters or the apparently deserving.

Grace begins when we cease keeping score. The first workers turn blessing into grievance because they keep the score and measure themselves against their neighbours rather than against the generosity of their master. That is the scandal and beauty of grace.

A great joy fills all hearts. Not those who arrived first; not those who worked longest; not merely those who think they have earned it...*All hearts.*

Perhaps that is the final challenge of this parable and a divine challenge at the heart of the Gospel. Can we rejoice in the blessings of other people? Are we able to celebrate grace given elsewhere? Can we trust that God's generosity toward another does not threaten God's generosity toward me?

For the Kingdom of Heaven begins whenever we stop asking, '*Why did they receive so much?*' and start marvelling that God has been so good to any of us at all. When we finally learn that lesson, the evil eye of envy begins to loosen its grip, comparison loses its power, and we discover ourselves free to delight in the wild generosity of God. Amen.

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⁵ Aquinas *Summa Theologica* II, II Qu 36 Article 1

⁶ *ipsum esse subsistens*