

Trinity 15 Puy de Serre 24/9/17

Ex 16 2-15; Phil 1 21 end; Mt 20 1-16

Our gospel reading this morning we can find difficult. All the workers spend time in the vineyard, some work all day enduring the heat of the day and others but a short time as the day draws to an end. When these are paid exactly the same amount as the first we have to feel sympathy with their feelings that they are worth more, don't we? Surely they have grounds for believing that they have had a raw deal and haven't as they say in Yorkshire, been 'tret right'?

The difficulty is that we live in a world which can base its values on how much we are paid for what we do, or what power and influence we exert because of our position.

Neymar, the world's most expensive football player recently signed by PSG is reputed to be paid between 5 and 600,000 euros a week, more than many will earn in a lifetime. Is he really worth that much?

We speak, almost with admiration of 'the movers and shakers' of this world, but are they of greater value than those they cause to be 'moved and shaken'?

But the point of the story is about God's infinite love and grace. In His sight all men and women are equal because they are made in His image. God so loved the world.... and everyone in it. Jesus came into our world to bring the possibility of salvation to us all. We have a lifetime to encounter and respond to His love. It is grace alone which enables us to do so. Some of us are fortunate to know, love and serve Him for most of our lives. Perhaps we grew up in loving Christian homes and just naturally came to faith in our early years. Others are not so fortunate. They may have little or no experience of love, only abuse and deprivation. Their lives may take them into dark, evil places where cruelty, hatred and suffering are the norm. They may even inflict these things on others, even less fortunate than themselves and yet, God in Jesus Christ continues to reach out to them in love, offering them hope and forgiveness.

So how should we respond to God's gift of grace? Our other two readings today have something to say about this.

In our Old Testament reading the children of Israel are complaining – come to think of it they seem to do a lot of that. They have forgotten how God saved them from slavery in Egypt and protected them, destroying Pharaoh’s pursuing army when He led them through the waters of the Red Sea. They are hungry and see no further than themselves and their empty bellies. They chose to forget the misery of slave labour, the brick making, the overseers’ lashes remembering only the fleshpots and the bread they enjoyed there. Poor Moses becomes the focus of their discontent but, in spite of their complaints God will supply their needs.

What a contrast we find in Paul. For me to live is Christ, to die is gain - a well known verse, sometimes used as an example of Christian discipleship, but what did it mean to him and what may it say to us today?

Saul was, from our enlightened Christian perspective, one of those more obvious sinners, if not a murderer himself, certainly an accomplice of those who were, certain that his understanding and worship of God was right and therefore justified in persecuting those who disagreed, especially the followers of the blasphemous Jesus who had been rightly executed for his sacrilegious claims. Yet God’s grace still reached out to him as Jesus revealed Himself to him on the Damascus road. He repented and came to faith, conscious of his sins – indeed he would later in life refer to himself as the greatest of all sinners – but knowing that he was forgiven, adopted into the family of God as a son and heir of His promises. He knew that, having been baptised into Christ, He shared in His death and when his own death came, would share in His resurrection. He looked forward to that promised time when he would see Jesus face to face, so to die would be gain. But in the meantime God was blessing others through his life and ministry. The members of the church in Philippi where he and Silas had sung God’s praises whilst in prison and had been used to bring the jailor, his family and many others to faith, need his support and encouragement and so he will choose to remain in order to give it to them.

It is easy for us to feel like the first group of workers. We work year after year, doing the right Christian things, going to church, saying our prayers, seeking to ‘win others for Christ,’ but how do we really react to the murderers, rapists, child abusers, thieves and swindlers who by the grace of God come to faith,

repent of their evil deeds and become our brothers and sisters in Him? Is it right that some may even live and enjoy the benefits of a life of crime and repent and be saved on their death beds? If we are honest, it doesn't feel fair but that, says Jesus is the way, God is happy to do things. Who are we to complain? If there is joy in heaven when one sinner repents should we, rather than feeling aggrieved, not ask Him to help us share in it?

So as we reflect on Jesus' parable together this morning, perhaps the best place to begin is with thanksgiving – always a good plan, I believe. By the grace of God we have been saved by faith in Jesus, not by our own efforts but by the love and gift of God. We were standing idle and lost in the market place and He called us into His service with the promise of reward, life in all its fullness as, with the help of His Holy Spirit, we grow in understanding His love for us in Jesus Christ and our ability to share it with others, and life with Him in the world to come. What a wonderful, joyous gift, and how we thank God for it.

But, surely, we who have been given so much, so freely, can also thank God that His love extends to others when they too come to know it. Sometimes it can be difficult as Corrie ten Boom reminds us. Touring Germany after the war preaching the gospel she found herself after one of her meetings face to face with a former Nazi prison guard who had persecuted her and her beloved sister Betsy in the camp and had probably been a significant contributor to her death. He told her how he had come to believe in Jesus and held out his hand to her. She was at first revolted, finding no desire to touch this man who she had come to loathe but prayed that if God loved him He would help her to love him too and, to her amazement she found her hand rising, almost involuntarily, to reach out and grasp his. With God all things are possible. Thanks be to God.