

25TH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Sunday, September 18th, 2011

a sermon preached by Fr. John-Francis Friendship SCP at S. Andrew's Church, Romford

Phil. 1: 21-30 and Matthew 20:1-16

GROWING IN GRACE

INTRODUCTION

"It's not fair!" cried Johnny as he ran across the playground to his mother. *"He gave the others three chocolates each, but there was only one left for me!"* Poor Johnny. His mother probably said, *There, there.*" Asked him whether he had done anything to deserve only one and generally tried to help him feel better. And, behind it all, maybe the thought, *'Well, life isn't fair and you'll have to get used to that...'*

The danger, of course, is that Johnny might end up with a sense of grievance unless he can come to terms with the fact that bad things do happen to good people and life isn't fair all the time. But what happened to us in our past needn't determine who we are becoming.

THE PARABLE OF THE WORKERS IN THE VINEYARD

Today, in the gospel reading we heard, Jesus presents us with a situation where workers seem to be right to claim they had been treated unfairly. Shouldn't those who only work for an hour or so be paid less than those who work all day long? They clearly would have benefited from taking their grievance to the Union – only such things didn't exist in those days! So they had to go to the boss and listen to him explain that he had every right to do what he did, after all he had the power to do so. Come back Karl Marx, all is forgiven!!

But, of course, Jesus wasn't talking economics. His parable wasn't aimed at sorting out our financial troubles. The bible cannot be thought of as an economic, any more than it is a scientific, text-book. What Jesus was offering was a story about the inclusive graciousness of God to people who thought only they had a prerogative on his generosity. The disciples would have assumed that the ones who should receive the sweets were those who had been around longest. And if you came from the right place – Israel – and kept all the rules, you would be rewarded by having a special place in the coming Reign of God.

So the workers were shocked at the decision of the landowner to pay everyone the same. All were to get equal treatment. How appalling!

Clearly, the story Jesus' tells isn't meant to illustrate social justice. Rather it's a parable, a word-picture. And, remember, our Lord used parables to illustrate a particular teaching and are meant to provoke discussion – even controversy. So today, as so often, the teaching Jesus wants to convey is all about the grace of God's inclusive love. You can't earn your right to be embraced into the Reign of God: it is God's free and gracious gift. But what is – 'Grace'? We use the word in all kinds of situations from the design of a gracious liner or dance to the behaviour of someone we meet.

Some years ago a group of us here spent the whole of Lent studying what is meant by the word and didn't exhaust its possibilities. Yet we recognise grace when we encounter it – and when it's

absent. Friday nights in Romford, for example, are hardly times when we can expect to experience people behaving graciously! As the 16th cent. Anglican priest-poet, George Herbert, exclaimed, 'Ah, what a thing is man devoid of grace!'

Many people have tried to explain what they understand by grace. In one of his poems St. John of the Cross wrote:

"What is grace" I asked God.
And He said, "All that happens."

Then He added, when I looked perplexed,
"Could not lovers
say that every moment in their Beloved's arms
was grace?
Existence is my arms,
though I well understand how one can turn
away from me
until the heart has wisdom."

St. Paul, in his Letter to the Philippians, urged them to *"live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ ... (so that) I will know that you are standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel."* (Phil.1:27)

The parable Jesus told about those workers who were all treated alike was intended to shock. It challenged his disciples (it was told to them, not to the people at large) to realise that God embraces all people: not just the Jews or the virtuous or the hardworking. Divine love is a free gift offered, irrespectively, to all.

But there is something enviable about those who are generous of themselves and accepting of others. (That is the essence of this Mass and why we celebrate Baptism in its context. Because through the Mass we welcome new member into the grace-filled, all-embracing Body of Christ.) And, in the sharing of food and wine we experience the means of communicating the transforming power of grace. We may sometimes feel that life hasn't been fair to us, that we have been hard done by, but we needn't let that control our lives. Rather we can learn to seek to practise that hospitality, generosity and inclusivity that is the mark of graceful living. It is the hope and task of every priest to enable people to grow in grace – just as it was St. Peter's desire that all might 'grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ' as he wrote in his second Letter (3:18).

CONCLUSION

Through our constant participation in this celebration of the Mass, where we proclaim and celebrate the passion, death and resurrection of Christ, we are to allow the grace of the Sacrament to change us, so may we be the means of grace and glory in our world. That is why being an Anglican or Catholic Christian means coming to Mass on the first day of the week and seeing that all our life is intended to flow from this grace-filled and re-creating Sacrament. Yet ALL the Sacraments are means of Grace: outward and visible ensigns of the promise of the inner encounter with God.

And as all life has the potential to be sacramental, and as the poets reminded us, grace is to be realised in every circumstance of life. Yet it is most fully realised as we open ourselves to the Holy Spirit of Divine Love.

That is the essence of all prayer and why we need to develop that ability. To look at the face of God in Christ and that we might be transfigured by his gracious gaze. To come to God in prayer, not simply for the needs we have, but just because we want to be with him. As a young Christian I was deeply moved by the way people would be found in certain churches (often catholic) in silent prayer. There was a time – and still is – when you could walk into a church and find people praying. Not talking to their friends, but deep in prayer before God. That is how lives are changed and filled with grace – through our deepening relationship with God.

There was once a man who plied the slave trade. The captain of a ship which sailed between Sierra Leone and the America's. He had learnt the trade in all its brutality but, one day in 1748, during a great storm at sea, he experienced what he later described as "a great deliverance". His name was John Newton and he is the author of one of the most popular songs of all time,

'Amazing Grace':

Amazing grace! (how sweet the sound)

That sav'd a wretch like me!

I once was lost, but now am found,

Was blind, but now I see.

Thro' many dangers, toils and snares,

I have already come;

'Tis grace has brought me safe thus far,

And grace will lead me home.

May we all 'grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. To him be glory both now and forever!'