Holy Covenant – Fifteenth Sunday After Pentecost – 21 September 2014

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Exodus 16. 2-15; Ps 105; Philippians 1. 21-30; Matthew 20. 1-16

With the possible exception of the parable of the Prodigal Son, I don't think any of Jesus' teachings causes as much consternation among nice Christians as this parable of the labourers in the vineyard. Because, like the parable of the Prodigal Son, this story just seems so unfair. How come the poor, dutiful older son doesn't get to party with his friends? How come the hardworking labourers who have borne the heat of the day, get no more than the idlers who show up late and put in minimum effort? Implicitly, it seems, many of us identify with the dutiful, hard-working ones – which suggests that maybe we feel we've missed out on a bit of fun somewhere along the line – and damn it – we'd like our just reward!

Well, I'm sure you are familiar with the some of the responses available to the preacher here. (1) There's the anthropological point: we are all equally undeserving of God's grace and provision. Even if we have been 'good' and dutiful most of our lives, we're also fundamentally still 'sinners'. Jesus is teaching that in the kingdom of heaven, everything is gift – nothing can be earned. Salvation is by grace, not works; (2) the theological point: it is God's prerogative to be generous, and of God's nature to give abundantly, so who are we to quibble with that? God is not unjust for even if God gives some *more* than we think they deserve, God does not give us *less* than we deserve. Jesus is teaching us not to measure God by our own stingy standards; (3) the spiritual point: the parable is warning against spiritual pride and the assumption that we are necessarily 'worthy' while others are surely not. For remember, the last will be first, and the first will be last. Our envious sideways glances at our neighbours simply show that we have not yet fully cottoned onto Jesus' strange subversion of the competitive, rivalrous patterns that run our world, have not yet entered ourselves fully into the felt abundance of the kingdom of heaven.

I think all of these responses are important and I have made use of them all myself! But what I notice about them now is how they make exclusively 'spiritual' use of a story which is about an economic reality that would have been very vivid for Jesus' hearers. So I wonder if this parable might also have something else to offer, something which could inform theological engagement with our economic reality.

As any of you who have visited the developing world (or parts of the United States) will know, the phenomenon of day labouring is alive and well in our time. Rather than having a permanent position, labourers are hired day by day to do particular jobs – and they congregate in market squares or street corners waiting to be engaged. Not to be hired means, for many, not to eat – which is why the law in the book of Deuteronomy provides: 'You shall not withhold the wages of poor and needy labourers … You shall pay them their wages daily before sunset, because they are poor and their livelihood depends on them' (Deut. 24. 14-15). The landowner who 'is like' the kingdom of heaven in Jesus' story is punctilious in fulfilling this obligation. In fact he is revealed as a real benefactor to those he has hired – since his multiple visits to the marketplace during the day (early in the morning, and at 9, 12, 3 and 5 o'clock) indicate his commitment that none be left without means of providing for themselves and their dependents.

Drawing on this vivid and real-world economic context, Jesus elaborates the character of the kingdom of heaven as a place of abundance in which all are given the opportunity to participate and share. Is it possible that this vision of the kingdom of heaven might in turn challenge the way we think about our real-world economy and how it works, dominated as it seems to be by assumptions of scarcity and competition?

I have recently discovered (thanks to Cynthia Bourgeault and Helen Luke) that the analogy between the character of God and economic activity goes deep in our language. One of the key words in our tradition for God is 'mercy'. In the Anglican church, for example, the general confession begins, 'Almighty God, whose nature is

always to have mercy'; 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice', says God through the prophet Hosea; and, in Micah we hear 'What does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God'. And so on, and so forth. 'His mercy is everlasting' (Ps. 100.4); 'His mercy endures forever' (Pss.107.1 and 136.1).[1]

Now what is interesting is that the root of this word, 'mercy', derives from the ancient Etruscan word '*merc*', and (get this) is also at the root of the words 'commerce' and 'merchant'.[2]

Helen Luke suggests that at heart, mercy means some kind of exchange. When applied to God, then, it signifies not just pity or compassion, but the whole giving matrix in which we live and move and have our being, the relationship of love that God is and in which we are held. And I find myself wondering what our experience of this reality of God's mercy, God's giving life, could mean for our practice of commerce, our exchange of goods and services, our economic practices of interdependence.

Wendell Berry, an American farmer, philosopher, eco-theologian, has also (like Jesus) drawn on the language of the economy to speak of God. He conceives of the 'kingdom of God' as 'the Great Economy' because, he says, this reality is indeed 'an economy', an exchange: 'it includes principles and patterns by which values or powers or necessities are parcelled out and exchanged'.[3] God's life is a field in which the relationships and exchanges that make life possible occur. Our human life, our patterns of exchange all depend upon and operate within this Great Economy – which includes everything that exists, the whole created order. And, he goes on to say, the problem with our industrial economy is that it has forgotten this dependence and so lacks proper respect for and accountability to the Great

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[1] Cynthia Bourgeault, *Mystical Hope: Trusting in the Mercy of God* (Lanham, MY: Cowley Publications, 2001), 22.
[2] Bourgeault, *Mystical Hope*, 23.
[3] Wendell Berry, 'Two Economies', http://www.worldwisdom.com/public/viewpdf/default.aspx?article-title=Two_Economies_by_Wendell_Berry.pdf (accessed 5 September 2014), 188. See also Ched Meyers, *Who Will Roll Away the Stone?* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994), 168-170.

Economy. Our little human economy mistakes itself for the *only* economy. It fails to remember its proper place in the whole, and this leads directly to the disastrous ecological impact of our ravening, surplus accumulating economic practices which may be understood as a kind of theft from the whole and from the future.

Theologically, the point I think is this. Once you use (as Jesus does) economic imagery to describe God – it works the other way too. If God is conceived as a certain kind of abundance, exchange, generosity, a reality in which everything and everyone belongs and finds its place, then this experience of God reflects back and calls for critical engagement with the world we are creating with our practices of exchange, our economies. And when the world we are creating is premised, as ours is, on scarcity, excessive accumulation, competition, when that world is one from which some are systematically and necessarily excluded, or systematically and necessarily exploited, then its ungodliness and inhumanity becomes starkly evident.

If the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire labourers in the vineyard, and then went out again at 9 and 12 and at 3 and 5, then the kingdom of heaven is merciful – an outgoing love which desires the participation of all and their material, as well as their 'spiritual', well-being. How this mercy might be translated into commercial, political and institutional practice is a complex matter, given the merciless world we have built for ourselves. But that this work of translation is intrinsic to our Christian vocation, there is no doubt at all.