

**Sermon preached at the Church of the Holy Trinity, Philadelphia
on Sunday September 21st 2008 by the Reverend Alan Neale
“Daring to Live Generously”**

Matthew chapter twenty, verse fifteen: “Why do you begrudge my generosity?”.

For some eighteen months I taught at a very, very, very minor league preparatory school in England. Oh those poor boys! Sometimes when homework was begin given, or some discipline exercised for miscreant behaviour, hands would soar into the air and the cry would be heard, “But sir... that’s not fair!!”. Which all would soon be followed by the lament, “Yes, sir, we know... life is not fair!”.

Isn’t that how many respond to today’s parable in Matthew chapter fifteen. The man who works all day is given the same wage as the man who works barely an hour... “but sir, but master, but Lord... that is not fair!”.

One commentator rather grandly declares, “The parable is not meant to reflect normal economic practice, nor to be a pattern for labour relations” – well, I hope we could figure that out for ourselves.

I believe our text is a significant way to understand the parable, “The master asks, ‘Why do you begrudge my generosity?’”.

Isn't this one of the great mysteries of the spiritual life? Isn't this one of the unsearchable riddles for the church, the Christian? How is it that we can spend any time with the God who abounds in graciousness and generosity and yet be people who carry shriveled hearts and minds and lips... oh yes, in the words of today’s motet, we may often “steal away to Jesus” in worship and religious talk but there is no “thunder in our soul” – no thunder of generosity sounding in what else would be a miserably wretched, demeaning and demanding world!

Moses and Aaron are confounded... why is that the people of God are so complaining when they have experienced the sovereign and gracious act of God to set them free?

This past week I attended an AA meeting and one of those present said that when he attended a meeting for the very first time, he was told, “You are the most important person in the room?”. The next day, another newcomer was there and our friend heard that he also was told, “You are the most important person in the room”. Immediately, he said, “I had a resentment!”. The begrudging of generosity!

“The master asks, ‘Why do you begrudge my generosity?’”.

Well, master, let me offer three reasons for such unreasonable and peculiar behaviour?

Theological, experiential and confrontational.

Theological – often, generally, the reason we “begrudge God’s generosity” is that the picture we have of God defines him as mean, distant... some divine curmudgeon who needs be persuaded to let go of some blessing which he may, if we are fortunate, dole out sparingly from his hands. Oh my... this is not the Father whom Jesus shares with us, this is not the Father to whom Jesus longs to introduce us. The complaining, righteous servant takes issue with the master... but if only he really knew the master’s heart, he would have kept silence.

Experiential – often, generally, the reason we “begrudge God’s generosity” is that we have been ourselves the unwitting and undeserving victims of thoughtless and vindictive meanness. Perhaps the constant drip of actions and words (from our very youth) that have expressed nastiness, malice, cruelty, spite... this drip has somehow caused our hearts to calcify, to harden. To quote from today’s anthem, “Senseless and empty cares force their way into our minds and often fill with madness our hearts, when robbed of hope”... yes, when “robbed of hope” that we will be treated generously and with love. The complaining, righteous servant takes issue with the master... perhaps such meanness had been shown to him that he could only find it in himself to show similar meanness to others?

Confrontational – often, generally, the reason we “begrudge God’s generosity” is that we become unhappy (perhaps even a little angry) when our acts of pettiness and meanness, when our lack of generosity, is confronted by the liberal generosity of God. It has been said, “In the land of the blind, the one-eyed man is king” – I thought said by Plato, though others think by Erasmus but, whatever the source, the quotation has truth... much of the time we may pride ourselves on our qualities of heart, on the kindness of our minds, on the charity of our words... but when we are confronted by the overwhelming generosity of God, His love, His grace beyond our “wildest imaginings”... then we will either want to change and become like Him or we will be angry and resolve, adamantly, to remain as we are. The complaining, righteous servant takes issue with the master... perhaps he was offended that his own lack of charity was made plain, quite and demonstrably plain!

St. Paul urges the Christians at Philippi to live a “life in a manner worthy of the Gospel of Christ” – we cannot do this if we are living lives which evidence meanness rather than generosity. In our worship we are confronted with the generous, out-pouring of love by God on the Cross... how can that “thunder” not sound and echo and reverberate in our lives?

All too often churches seem to begrudge generosity shown to the guest, to the visitor... how sad!

All too often Christians behave with mean spiritedness to one another... how sad?

And, today, we are being presented with a peculiar challenge...in a time of financial forebodings and economic gloom, how we will respond? What will be the manner of our lives that distinguishes us from the world?

Yesterday I recalled the story of a mother with, I think, eleven children. The mother was asked, “But you must have one or two favourites amongst the eleven children; one or two that you love more than others?”. The mother said, “Yes, you’re right. There is one that I love the most... the one who, at that time, is hurting the most”. Who are we to begrudge that mother’s generosity shown towards the one who is “hurting the most”.

And so, friends, and so... it is with God. AMEN