



# Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost

## Sermon by Revd Margaret Place



Sunday 24 September 2023

### READINGS

Exodus 16: 2-15; Psalm 105: 1-6, 35-44; Philippians 1; 21-30; Matthew 20: 1-16

## *“It’s not fair”*

“It’s not fair” or words to that effect. We have all heard this, and we have all said it. It is said when we are feeling threatened. Someone else has what we think we should get, or someone has been given an undue advantage, or we have just lost our somewhere, and life looks scarily unpredictable.

Let’s examine each reading in turn. In Exodus, we have a slave people whinging - again. They complained about getting across the Red Sea, and God opened the way for them – and dealt with the Egyptian army while God was about it! Then they had no water. God provided. Now they have no food. It seems that the “freedom” they cried for has been somewhat misleading. They thought they were going to get away from hardship – and they got away from all the horrors of slavery, but instead of an easy life, they are faced with the sort of hardships faced by any free person – looking out for food and water, and making plans. With the ridiculous cry of “in Egypt we used to ....” Aaron and Moses must have been totally sick of them, but God wasn’t. God knew their inabilities and their lack, so provided Manna in the morning and quails at night. But they could only take enough for the day, except for the night before the sabbath, where they took enough for two days so they would not be working on the Sabbath, they had just enough for the day.

In Philippians, Paul is encouraging the members of the church to remain strong. Paul probably knows his imprisonment probably means his execution sooner rather than later, but he longs for death. He longs to be with Christ, and even in an age where lack of healthcare and the difficulties of living under a harsh Empire, people accept death, they don’t long for it. Paul may well have felt the frustration of being in jail and neither able to minister to the many communities he has founded, nor is he dead and in the presence of Christ. Nevertheless he is trying to make the best of it and encourage the Philippians to stand strong in their faith, and keep it all going.

In Matthew we have the story of the workers in the vineyard. In this area, grapes had to be harvested before the rains came, otherwise the wetness will destroy the crop. So he goes to the equivalent of That Hardware shop, where labourers wait, some with cardboard placards, hoping a contractor will give them work to do. And the owner of the vineyard takes on more and more workers as the day progresses. By the evening, he pays the men for the work done, and starting with the most recently employed, he pays them the going wage for the day – 1 Denarius. Those who started early in the day were hoping for more, but they got the going rate – one Denarius. Not fair. They worked all day for the same wage as the one who worked for one hour.

So what do we learn from these, and what is God saying? In Exodus, Moses and Aaron are learning what every leader has to learn: "Uneasy lies the head that wears the crown." In other words, good leadership is very hard work. Ask any CEO of a successful company, and you will hear stories of years of hard, often unrewarding work, beginning on the kitchen table, or in the garage, and accounts of losing money and starting again and only after decades of work can they see success and afford the designer clothes and the big cars and the massive houses.

The other thing we see here is that God understands that Moses and Aaron are dealing with people who are freed slaves. Their bodies may have been freed, but their minds weren't. Slaves have no freedom, and that also means no responsibility beyond getting their tasks done. They live, however badly, in property provided by the masters, they eat food, whatever the quality, provided by the masters, and if their masters lose everything, the slaves are sold to someone who will take them on and repeat the process. But once they are freed, suddenly the shackles are gone, but so are the provisions, and they now have to take on the responsibilities of every freed person. And we see here these people are not like the Khoi and the San in our country who can wring sustenance out of the desert. They are people who are victims. The resourcefulness that we find in every informal settlement, on every farm and in the rural areas, and in every backyard business in our country, as people try to wrest a living in the current dreadful circumstances in our land, that was totally missing. They were a helpless group of victims. And God provided social welfare. Manna in the morning, and quails in the evening. But God understood victims too. No grabbing extra helpings of manna to sell on the quiet, or to have a party at God's expense. Just enough for each day, and enough on Friday to last for Saturday, the sabbath. God is providing food, but God is providing discipline too.

In Paul's letter to the Philippians, God is using the situation – and God can trust Paul to do and be the right thing – to further the kingdom of heaven. Paul is showing what every Christian became known for, a complete absence of the fear of death. Death means, for Paul, being in the presence of Christ, and it is something in which all Christians deep down place their hope. Secondly, the Philippian Christians are learning, with Paul's encouragement, to live the Christian way without a leader to tell them what to do. Their leader is the holy Spirit, the community is the watchdog to keep checks and balances, and stop religious extremes which can so easily manifest, and the society is the evidence of God's presence in the actions of these Christians. And what no one at the time could see was that Paul's letters – probably a second best in his mind – have become a significant part of our scriptures, and a vital part of the building up of our faith.

And now the Gospel reading. The most prevalent interpretation of this is to show that, no matter when you come to faith in Christ, you are as worthy of heaven as one who has been part of the body of Christ since their infancy. The penitent thief on the cross would spend time in heaven along with all the apostles and he would be equal to them all in the eyes of God. That we get, but we must also remember that Jesus was a Jew talking to Jews. The Master of the vineyard represented God, and the master of the vineyard was fair. A denarius was a good daily wage for anyone, and all his workers got it. Not equal pay for equal work, but equal pay for equal people. Whether or not you worked for one hour or twelve, you needed to pay for food and taxes and all else and this generous master knew that and paid accordingly.

Secondly, God is God and God can do what he likes with his own resources. When misfortune strikes, we get upset, because good church goers such as ourselves feel we deserve the miracle which may or may not come. I asked a surgeon friend of mine whether or not she saw miracles in the course of her job. She said yes she did, but they happened to all sorts of people, not only the religious ones. It is God who chooses how God will answer our prayers. Our faith is based on a risen Christ which will bring victory out of defeat

and life out of death, but HOW that happens is for God to choose. Ours is to be faithful, to pray, and to watch God at work and give glory

So when we commit ourselves to becoming Christians, we are signing up to a contract which makes some promises, but leaves some parts blank. We know we are following a crucified Christ who rose again from the dead and conquers all, including those two intractables, sin and death. We know too that we are required, not to be helpless victims, but to take up our cross and follow wherever that may lead, However in our weakness, at those times when we are victims and unable to stand up, God will be there with just enough of what we need. We need to know that God will do as God sees fit, and following God in Christ will mean we will be puzzled, hurt, bored, surprised, rejoicing, and all sort of other things, but we will know that ultimately we are in Christ, and like St Paul, we will long to be in the presence of Christ when our task here has ended. And most of all, in these very troubled times when governments, churches, families, and all the mainstays of our civilization seem to be disintegrating, may our descendants, spiritual and physical, look back and find what we have left behind is as useful to their faith journey as St Paul's letters are to ours.