

Anglican-Lutheran Society Conference
16th-20th September 2011
“THE WORD PREACHED – THE WORD READ”
Salisbury, Wiltshire, UK

SERMON PREACHED IN SALISBURY CATHEDRAL

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Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

The Lutheran World Federation held an event last week, rather grandly titled A Consultation on Biblical Hermeneutics – really a conference on how to interpret the Bible in our various contexts, as Lutherans, in the 21st century. It was interesting, stimulating, challenging, argumentative at times, but never boring or dry. The consultation took place in Nairobi, in Kenya; and there was about a 45 minute drive from Jomo Kenyatta Airport to the place where we were meeting. On the way, we passed through an industrial area, very close to the slum called Sinai, where over 120 people died last week in a fire. There were low rise factories, workshops, trading posts and ‘godowns’. Amongst these buildings, on scrubby wasteland littered with rubbish, there were a number of shacks: actually, even to call them that is too dignified. There were poles, or tree branches, or buckets, with sheets of plastic draped over them, providing only minimal protection from sun, rain and the mud that was all around. The taxi driver said that these were street boys, who were living there; and in the open spaces, there were groups of these boys and men, gathered together. The driver said that they were hoping for work – casual labour washing cars or anything else that might come along: something like a Nairobi job centre, but less pleasant, and less hopeful. It’s a terribly precarious life, woven through with danger, hunger, anxiety and hopelessness.

This is the picture that we are presented in today’s Gospel, in many senses: the workers hired for work in the vineyard are casual labourers, who stand around in the market place from dawn, hoping that someone will come and give them work – any work – so that they can hope to feed themselves and their families. They would be paid daily, so each new day would involve another anxious wait in the early morning, perhaps extending to noon – or even, for the unlucky, the weak, the older men, all those less able to carry out a day’s labouring, to late afternoon, waiting patiently, desperately, hopefully for a little work, a few coins, a loaf of bread in lieu.

But into this picture, this commonplace situation of 1st century Palestine, or 21st century Africa, the grace of God breaks in. When, at the end of the day, all the workers gather to receive their well-earned wages, it turns out that they are not being paid an hourly rate, or apparently even in any way that is fair. From the perspective of labour relations or employment law, the owner of the vineyard is behaving in a way that is deeply unfair, and one that would today guarantee an instant wildcat strike. How can you pay everyone the same, whether they work for one hour or eight? Surely, any employer who went on doing that for any length of time would end up with a lazy and uncooperative work force.

But this vineyard owner is God, and the field is the very kingdom of heaven, and things work differently there. In God's economy, we cannot earn our way into heaven; the strong and the clever, the young and the able-bodied have no advantage over the weak, the old and the broken of limb and heart. It is not the amount of work that we do, nor the status we occupy, that makes us recipients of God's generosity, but his abundant grace, which overflows towards all of us. And – to look at it another way, the reward of being with Christ that Paul talks about in the letter to the Ephesians is offered to all: the mission we have during our lives will differ, and some of us will indeed have to bear the burden of the day, and heat of the scorching sun, while less is asked of others. And the wages, the reward is the same for all - but God's response to those who claim a greater share of the reward, maybe a more prominent role in the Kingdom – a seat at Christ's right hand, like James and John – is "Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?" This rebuke reminds us that the story, not just this parable, but the whole of the great salvation story is not about what we do, but about what God does out of sheer grace. At the same time, God's grace and generosity towards us demands of us that we show the same generosity of spirit towards others; when the wages we receive – eternal, unfading, the joy of Christ's presence without end – are so profoundly and divinely beautiful, why would we want to be miserly about sharing that joy? We never need fear that God's grace and love will not be enough to go around. Great indeed is the LORD and greatly to be praised!

During our ALS Conference, which has been meeting at Sarum College since Friday, we have heard several times about the reluctance of rulers – both of church and state – to allow people access to the Bible unmediated by clergy or theologians. The fear was that actually reading what the Bible says would encourage the masses to sedition and unrest. And you can see that passages like today's Gospel, which undermines normal economic principles, might indeed unsettle working people. Of course, this does not mean that the text is an industrial relations manual (try selling the principle of unmerited wages to trade union leaders or managers!). But today's Gospel is subversive, for it subverts the profit motive, the idea of earning salvation, of working to gain God's approval and love, the concept of demanding what is ours by right. Instead of saying "What's in it for me?" Jesus teaches us to say "What's in it for my neighbour?" Instead of envy and jealousy, he calls for grace and generosity. In the lovely words of the hymn we sang today, he calls us not to be "by powers and systems close confined" but to "seek hope for humankind."

And we come today, "with all our heart and mind, his call to hear, his love to find."

Amen.