

Sermon for Easter 2 2018

[Acts 4.32-35](#)

[1 John 1.1-2.2](#)

[John 20.19-end](#)

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be now and always acceptable in your sight, O Lord our rock and our redeemer.

Well, today is 'Low Sunday' – though there is still debate over quite why that name is often attached to this Sunday. Some claim, practically, that it's because attendance is low compared to Easter, others that we all feel a bit 'low' after the 'high' of Easter. Whichever you prefer, congratulations to you for being here, and welcome back to David and Jenny - I hope the wines of the Slovak Republic were up to standard!

Anyway, we are in that period of time when the lectionary says that we Must Use Acts as one of the readings, and since I don't want to risk finding out what happens if we don't, let's give our attention to it.

"From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs" ,

If you correctly identified the origin of that phrase, then well done for reading your pew sheet. It was, as you may perhaps already have known, Karl Marx writing a *Critique of the Gotha Program* in 1875. But you'd not be far wrong if you gave it an earlier date, for it, or some recognisable variant of it, has been used over many years- in fact some writers go so far as to trace it's origins back to the very passage from Acts which we've just heard.

And did it work? – it doesn't seem to have lasted that long, though it's been an ideal in some societies. Perhaps our culture has made too much of individualism – one only has to recall the incomprehension of colonial governments when meeting societies where the 'potlatch' was a part of it's structure, where giving away 'wealth' (not necessarily as cash) was a way of reinforcing social cohesion, to realise the deeply ingrained nature of the differences -perhaps the recent debates about the gender gap in pay have sensitised us to these issues. Some recent work¹ has sought to separate the idea of fairness, an idea which can be hard to quantify, from the idea of equality, to which it's easier to give a numerical value.

It seems that people are relatively happy to put up with inequality if it can be seen to be 'fair' to represent some genuine difference in the value of what the person is doing for society.

So what do we make of the parable of the 'Labourers in the Vineyard'² - which sets unfairness up as a choice made by the giver – but this is a metaphor for the Kingdom,

'The Kingdom of Heaven is like....', not a real situation with real wages. Taken literally it's an example of 'unfair equality', something it can be hard to justify.

So how do we, how did the early disciples, judge what was fair? It's not clear from the passage from Acts exactly how they did this, how they judged each person's need. And remember they did this at a time when the Second Coming was, in some views, expected reasonably soon.

*'Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.'*³, which comes (with slight variations) in the 3 Synoptic Gospels, gave a perspective that might alter perceptions of value.

One suggestion is that the idea of fairness only applies when people are in a fairly sizeable

1 New Scientist article, No 3171, 31 March 2018, pp28-13

2 The Bible, Matthew 20: 1-16

3 The Bible :Matthew 16.28, Mark 9.1, Luke 9.27

group, indeed may be what enables us to work together in fairly large groups – but for some this just seems not to work- how many Ferraris or Super-yachts do I really need? Some seem to need many, and I in contrast don't really feel I need any, but it's not clear that it makes those with many any happier: the story of The Happy Man's Shirt still has its force today.

Fairness is a very real issue in the context of Fair Trade, a subject close to our hearts, for real, fair, comparisons are difficult to make – what may seem like a pittance in our terms may be a decent living wage in other places, and then there's the benefits which come along with the organisation, which can include reasonable healthcare in a country where it's normally only the very rich which can afford it, the chance to give children a decent education, some sense of empowerment, maybe only over what seem to be the small things in life, but some room for self determination is better than none.

And Fairness applies in other human relations beyond pay and wealth – in a marriage for example, something which probably only works well in the wider context of family and in the family itself, which needs to be part of a community– and I think I'm not out of order in congratulating Lis and Paul – I think it's 40 years Today?

The other question which arises from this somewhat hard headed Yorkshireman is 'did the books balance' did the incomings and outgoings match up, did they end up 'in the black' or 'in the red'?

It might seem strange to ask such a question, even un-Biblical, un-Christian – lacking in faith that God will supply what we need. There's a very real tension here for many people, and you'll recall my liking (so strong that Gill Cole referred to it in one of her sermons) for the Prayer often attributed to St Teresa of Avila, it exists in different versions , one of which is:

Christ has no body but yours,
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,
Yours are the eyes with which he looks
Compassion on this world,
Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good,
Yours are the hands, with which he blesses all the world.
Yours are the hands, yours are the feet,
Yours are the eyes, you are his body.
Christ has no body now but yours,
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,
Yours are the eyes with which he looks
compassion on this world.

which makes some fairly practical observations about theologies which tend towards 'leaving it all to God' – the old question of Faith or Works again- but Teresa would say we have to do something too maybe as an outcome of Faith, we are God's agents here on Earth to do His Will, to assist forward His Kingdom of Justice and Peace: and that also means getting the finances right- ask a Church Treasurer!

So when we go off today, a week after the Resurrection, let us try, as far as lies in our grasp, to live, work and deal fairly, testing that idea against the judgement of the community within which we live and work and pray. Amen