

t. 0431 866 214
e. vicar@stagnesblackrock.org.au

ST AGNES' PASTORAL LETTER September 17, 2020

Dear friends

You continue to be in my prayers as I hope you are in mine. This is the 20th pastoral letter I have written during this pandemic period, which shows just how long we've been at it. Unfortunately we are not 'out of the woods' yet, and are unlikely to be so until a vaccine arrives. We hope, of course, that something resembling what used to count as 'normal' human interaction might be possible once more within the next few months. But nothing is entirely certain just now, and it is unlikely to be for a while yet. The goal-posts keep moving, which makes it very difficult to plan anything that will involve other people or travel of some kind.

So how do we live with such uncertainty? And how do we cope with the curtailment of those western, middle-class freedoms we cherish so much? Our Christian faith would answer both questions in the same way, I believe. Whether we are struggling with uncertainty or whether we are struggling with the curtailment of our freedoms, the biblical tradition would encourage us to look not to governments or to doctors or even to economists for our salvation, but to Christ. For Christ entered this world with no certainties or guarantees that he would navigate its dangers successfully. Christ dealt with uncertainty and the curtailment of his freedoms. Indeed, he suffered far worse. He was imprisoned and tortured, and killed by the state. This means that he understands what it is like to bear our fragile human frames and minds. He knows how to sympathise with us in our weakness and frailty. So let us trust ourselves into his loving hand, he who passed through the very worst that human beings can do to one another, and yet rose to offer hope and comfort to all who suffer.

At a practical level, I would encourage you all to the discipline of daily prayer. I am repeating myself, I know, but this is so important and fundamental to every Christian's pilgrimage. In prayer we learn to still the panic that sometimes rises in mind and heart as we look at the chaos and the anxiety all around us. In prayer we learn to listen, instead, to the voice of God, who tells us that we are loved, accepted and secure in Christ. In prayer we learn to tune in to the 'bigger picture' of God's plans and purposes for both ourselves and our world. And we find there are resting place, a place of sabbath healing, which is able to sooth our fears and put away our anxieties. In prayer we are invited to cast our cares on Christ, who can give us strength and courage for the journey. And, having done so, we can learn that there are many others who are struggling with far worse challenges than us, and we can learn to have compassion for these others and find the strength to reach out, as Christ has reached out to us.

Some good news came through last week: Bruce Everett is to be ordained a deacon of the Anglican Church, pending arrangements being made for a suitable placement in 2021. Sincere congratulations to Bruce for this affirmation of his call, and a thankyou from him to everyone who has supported Bruce throughout the journey so far. Details about all of that will follow in due time.

Thank you to everyone who has continued to tithe to our church via electronic means. If you have not made a contribution for a while, I encourage you to do so using these account details:

Account name: St Agnes Anglican Church Black Rock
BSB: 033-033 Account number: 813-228

Cheques can still be sent to our Honorary Treasurer at 35 Arkaringa Crescent, Black Rock 3193.

For those who like to follow Archbishop Freier's weekly messages, they can be accessed by the Anglican Media YouTube channel [here](#). A conversation I had recently with Meredith Lake from 'Soul Search' on ABC Radio National can be found [here](#). The University of Divinity's blog site is also a terrific source of theological reflection for thirsty souls. It can be found [here](#).

I've included with this letter the lectionary readings and collects for the next four weeks, along with a couple of recent homilies, one of them written for Social Justice Sunday on Sept 20.

Please, if there is any thing that you need, including spiritual counsel, be in touch.

Yours in the faith of Christ,

Garry Deverell
Vicar

I normally work Sunday 7am-1pm, and Monday to Thursday 9am-3pm

Collect for 16th Sunday after Pentecost (Sept 20)

Loving and righteous God, your boundless generosity exceeds all that we can desire or deserve, and you give to the last worker all you promised to the first: liberate us from all jealousy and greed, that we may be free to love and serve others, and in your service may find our true reward; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Prayer of the week (Sept 20-26)

Loving Father, whose son Jesus Christ has taught us that what we do for the least of our brothers and sisters we also do for him: give us the will to be the servant of others as he was the servant of all, who gave up his life and died for us, and yet lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Collect for 17th Sunday after Pentecost (Sept 27)

Grant, O merciful God, that your people might have that mind that was in Christ Jesus, who emptied himself and took the form of a servant, and in humility became obedient even to death. For you have highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, Jesus Christ the Lord; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, in everlasting glory. Amen.

Prayer of the week (Sept 27-Oct 3)

O God, you declare your almighty power chiefly in showing mercy and pity: mercifully grant us such a measure of your grace that, running in the way of your commandments, we may obtain your gracious promises, and be made partakers of your heavenly treasure; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Collect for 18th Sunday after Pentecost (Oct 4)

Almighty God, your son Jesus was the stone rejected by the builders and, by your doing, he has been made the chief cornerstone: grant that, by the power of his Spirit working within us, we may become living stones built up into your dwelling-place, a temple holy and acceptable to you; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God for ever and ever. Amen.

Prayer of the week (Oct 4-10)

Generous God, whose hand is open to fill all things with plenteousness: make us ever thankful for your goodness and grant that we, remembering the account that we must one day give, may be faithful stewards of your bounty; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Collect for 19th Sunday after Pentecost (Oct 11)

Saving and healing God, you have promised that those who have died with Christ shall live with him: grant us grace to be continually thankful for all you have done for us, and in that thankfulness be eager to serve and live for others, so that we and all your children may rejoice in your salvation; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God for ever and ever. Amen.

Prayer of the week (Oct 11-17)

Almighty God, in your wisdom you have so ordered our earthly life that we must walk by faith and not by sight: give us such trust in your fatherly care that in the face of all perplexities we may give proof of our faith by the courage of our lives; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

20 SIXTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST [25] G
 Main Readings: Exodus 16.14-31
 Ps 105.1-6, 37-45
 Philippians 1 or 1.21-30
 Matthew 20.1-16
 [Jonah 3.10 - 4.11; Ps 145.1-8]
 MP: § Ps 27; § Matthew 19.13-22
 EP: Exodus 16.14-31; Ps 145.14-21; Romans 15.7-13

21 Monday: MATTHEW, APOSTLE, EVANGELIST AND MARTYR R
 Proper collect: Invitation, Preface, Post-Communion, Blessing [Saints]
 Ps 25
 Ecclesiastes 5.4-12
 Matthew 19.16-30
 Ps 50
 Nahum 1.15 - 2.9
 Matthew 6.16-24
 Ps 119.41-64
 2 Maccabees 7.1-19
 Ephesians 4.17-28

22 Tuesday G
 Of the day: G
 Proverbs 3.27-34
 Ps 15
 Luke 8.16-18
 Ps 51
 Nahum 2.10 - 3.7
 Matthew 6.25 - 7.5

23 Wednesday G
 Proverbs 30.5-9
 Ps 119.97-104
 Luke 9.1-6
 Ps 54, 55.1-12
 Nahum 3.8-19
 Matthew 7.6-23

24 Thursday G
 Ecclesiastes 1.2-11
 Ps 90.1-6
 Luke 9.7-9
 Ps 56; 57
 Joel 1.1-14
 Matthew 7.24 - 8.4

25 Friday G
 Sergius of Moscow, abbot and teacher (d. 1392)
 Ecclesiastes 3.1-11
 Ps 144.1-4
 Luke 9.18-22
 Collect of Teacher
 Ps 64; 67
 1 Maccabees 2.49-70
 Ephesians 6.1-9

26 Saturday G
 Lanfranc Andrews, bishop of Winchester (d. 1626)
 Ecclesiastes 11.9 - 12.8
 Ps 90.13-17
 Luke 9.43b-45
 Collect of a Bishop
 Ps 66
 1 Maccabees 3.1-26
 Ephesians 6.10-24

27 SEVENTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST [26] G
 Main Readings: Exodus 17.1-7
 Ps 78.1-4, 11-16
 Philippians 2 or 2.1-13
 Matthew 21.23-32
 [Ezekiel 48.1-4, 25-32; Ps 25.1-9]
 MP: § Ps 96; § Matthew 19.23-30
 EP: Exodus 18.5-24
 Ps 25.1-9
 Romans 15.14-22
 (23-29) 30-33

28 Monday
 Job 1.6-22
 Ps 17.1-7
 Luke 9.46-50
 Ps 71
 Joel 2.25 - 3.8
 Matthew 9.1-13

29 Tuesday: MICHAEL AND ALL ANGELS W
 Proper collect: Invitation, Preface, Post-Communion, Blessing [Saints]
 Daniel 7.9-10, 13-14
 or Ezekiel 1.4-12
 Ps 138
 Revelation 12.7-12a
 John 1.45-51
 Ps 34
 Isaiah 6.1-7
 Acts 12.1-11
 Revelation 8.1-6

Of the day: G
 Job 3.1-23
 Ps 88.1-7
 Luke 9.51-56
 Ps 69.1-16
 Joel 3.9-21
 Matthew 9.14-26

30 Wednesday G
Anonymous, priest and biblical scholar (d. 420)
 Job 9.1-12 (13) 14-16
 Ps 88.8-15
 Luke 9.57-62
 Collect of a Monastic
 Ps 73
 1 Maccabees 4.1-36
 Colossians 1.21-29

1 Thursday G
 Job 19.21-27
 Ps 27.9-17
 Luke 10.1-12
 Ps 74
 Ezra 2.64 - 3.8
 Matthew 10.1-15

2 Friday G
 Job 38.1, 12-21; 40.3-5
 Ps 139.6-11
 Luke 10.13-16
 Ps 77
 Ezra 3.9 - 4.6
 Matthew 10.16-27

3 Saturday G
 Job 42.1-3 (4) 5-6 (7-11) 12-17
 Ps 119.65-72
 Luke 10.17-24
 Ps 78.39-70
 1 Maccabees 6.18-47
 Colossians 2.16-23

OCTOBER 2020

When the anniversary date of the dedication of a church is unknown or falls in Advent, Lent or Easter, or on a Principal Holy Day, it may be observed on any Sunday in October

HC	MP	EP	G
4	EIGHTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST [27] Main Readings Exodus 20.1-4, 7-9, 12-20 § Ps 118.19-29 Ps 19 Philippians 3 or 3.4b-14 Matthew 21.33-46 [Isaiah 5.1-7; Ps 80.7-15] Supplementary Readings § Ps 85 § Matthew 20.17-28		
<p>Prayers of thanksgiving for the whole created order and intercessions for the right use of the resources of the earth, its conservation and for the abundance of its fruits, are appropriate for this day and those near it (see ' Rogation Days', APBA pp.451 and 634-635).</p> <p>It is also appropriate that thanksgiving and intercession be offered at this time for all human wisdom, imagination, skill and labour.</p> <p>When the anniversary date of the dedication of a church is unknown or falls in Advent, Lent or Easter, or on a Principal Holy Day, it may be observed on any Sunday in October. For suitable readings see the table of Readings for certain Lesser Festivals on p. 68.</p>			
5	Monday G Galatians 1.6-12 Ps 111 Luke 10.25-37 Ps 82, 84 Haggai 1.1-11 Matthew 11.1-11	Ps 85, 87 1 Maccabees 7.1-18 Colossians 3.1-11	
6	Tuesday G William Tyndale, biblical scholar (d. 1536) Galatians 1.13-24 Ps 86 Haggai 1.12 - 2.9 Matthew 11.12-24	Collect of a Saint Ps 88 1 Maccabees 7.19-32 Colossians 3.12-17	W
7	Wednesday G Galatians 2.1-2 (3-6) 7-14 Ps 117 Luke 11.1-4	Ps 90 Haggai 2.10-23 Matthew 11.25 - 12.8	
8	Thursday G Galatians 3.1-5 Song of Zechariah (APBA pp. 10 or 425) Luke 11.5-13	Ps 89.1-48 Zechariah 1.1-17 Matthew 12.9-21	
9	Friday G Galatians 3.7-14 Ps 111.1-6 Luke 11.15-26	Ps 89.39-55 Zechariah 1.18 - 2.13 Matthew 12.22-37	
10	Saturday G Galatians 3.22-29 Ps 105.1-7 Luke 11.27-28	Pss 92, 93 Zechariah 3.1 - 4.7 Matthew 12.38-50	

HC	MP	EP	G
11	NINETEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST [28] Main Readings Exodus 32.1-14 Ps 106.1-6, 20-24 Philippians 4 or 4.1-9 Matthew 22.1-14 [Isaiah 25.1-9; Ps 23] Supplementary Readings § Ps 85 § Matthew 20.29-34		
12	Monday G Elizabeth Fry, prison reformer, England (d. 1845) Galatians 4.22 - 5.1 Ps 113 Luke 11.29-32	Collect of a Saint Ps 103 Daniel 1 1 Peter 1.1-9	W
13	Tuesday G Galatians 5.1-6 Ps 119.41-48 Luke 11.37-41	Pss 101; 102.1-11 Zechariah 6 Matthew 13.18-30	
14	Wednesday G Galatians 5.18-25 Ps 1 Luke 11.42-46	Ps 108; 109.20-30 Zechariah 7.1 - 8.8 Matthew 13.31-43	
15	Thursday G Teresa of Avila, teacher (d. 1592) Ephesians 1.1-10 Ps 98.1-7 Luke 11.47-54	Collect of a Teacher Ps 104.26-37 Daniel 2.36-49 1 Peter 2.4-10	W
16	Friday G Hugh Latimer and Nicholas Ridley, bishops and martyrs (d. 1555) Ephesians 1.11-14 Ps 33.6-12 Luke 12.1-7	Collect of Martyrs Ps 105.23-45 Daniel 3.1-15 1 Peter 2.11-17	R
17	Saturday Ignatius of Antioch, bishop and martyr (d. c. 115) Ephesians 1.15-23 Ps 8 Luke 12.8-12	Collect of a Martyr Ps 106.25-50 Daniel 3.16-30 1 Peter 2.18-25	R

The Paradox of Forgiveness

Text: Matthew 18.21-35

On August 22 in 2005 an extraordinary rite of forgiveness was enacted in the English city of Coventry and the German city of Dresden. The English ceremony took place at Coventry Cathedral which, on the 14th of November 1940, was destroyed by German bombs. The German ceremony took place at the newly restored Frauenkirche, which was destroyed by English bombs on the 13th of February 1945. At each of the ceremonies both English and German worshippers sought, and received, the forgiveness of both God and each other for the blindness which led to their mutual destruction of each other in the 2nd World War. As we learn from today's gospel, real forgiveness cannot be granted without an acknowledgment of real guilt, so the liturgies did not shy away from naming that guilt. The bombing of Coventry was part of a campaign to steal away the freedom of the English people. It was explicitly designed to kill people—women, men and children—and so to cower them into submission and surrender. The Dresden bombing took place when the war was all but over. It is widely acknowledged that there was not even a strategic military reason for the bombing. The German military machine has already broken down. The bombing, which levelled Dresden and killed 40 000 people, was ordered simply to kill as many German civilians as possible. It was extremely humbling to be in Dresden on August 13th of 2005 to hear a local Roman Catholic priest tell us, with tears, how much it meant to him, and to the people of Dresden, that my colleagues and I should come to Dresden to reflect with them on the forgiveness at the heart of our shared gospel.

The crimes committed in the 2nd World War were, you see, not only crimes committed by one group of human beings against another. They were also crimes committed by one group of *Christians* against another. Many of the soldiers and pilots involved in the conflict were Christians—Anglicans, Lutherans, Methodists, Presbyterians, Reformed and Roman Catholic—Christians who were killing each other in the name of tribal sovereignty. What the Second World War highlighted, graphically and tragically, was not only the inhumanity of men and women towards other men and women, but also the lack of true reconciliation at the heart of European Christianity.

In turning to today's gospel reading, I'd like you to note two things. First, that Peter's question about forgiveness is not occasioned by the misdeeds of someone beyond the community of faith. Peter asks how many times he is called to forgive a member of his *own church*. "Seventy-times-seven" times, says Jesus, or, if I may translate, as many times as is necessary for the sake of reconciliation. For what is the church if not a reconciled community, a community that is able to live at peace with itself in spite of all the sins of its members? What is the church if its members cannot forgive each other as Christ has forgiven them? If the church cannot do this, then it is not the church. It is nothing more than a sociological or political reality where birds of a feather flock together. If a church's members cannot live with each other's differences and forgive each other's sins, then we are nothing more than a social club, gathered around the very ghettos of race, class or gender that Christ came to overcome.

People sometimes ask me why I am still part of the church, especially given the church's participation in the genocide against my people. The people who ask are usually those who have been wounded by the church, people who feel that the church has let them down or, at least, undervalued what they had to contribute. My reply usually goes something like this: the scandal of the gospel is that Christ, who had no sin, yet became sin for our sake. He took on the flesh of people who hate and kill each other. By doing so, he loved and accepted our fragile humanity. He

forgave our sins and made reconciliation possible. Who am I, then, to pretend that I am somehow superior to anyone else in the church? The church can only exist by forgiveness. How can I, who have been forgiven my sins by both Christ and my sisters and brothers, refuse to forgive the church? I cannot.

Which brings me to the second thing I would like you to notice about today's gospel passage: that forgiveness is only possible for people who are willing, themselves, to forgive. That's the point of the story about the forgiven slave who cannot forgive his brother, is it not? Although the king, out of sheer mercy, had forgiven his unpayable debt, the slave was not able to do the same for a brother who owed *him* something. So the king threw the unmerciful slave into prison. Now, some of you, I know, will think this very harsh. Perhaps some of you will even get a little theological and say that this story encourages a gospel of *works* because what it says, in the end, is that it is our capacity to forgive that ultimately earns God's forgiveness. Well, to that I would reply in the classically reformed way: that our capacity to forgive another does not *earn* God's forgiveness, but rather shows that we are people who have truly *experienced* the power and truth of forgiveness ourselves. Only the person who knows that they can *never* repay the debt owed to God, only the person who knows themselves to be loved and forgiven it all, would possibly be able to forgive the crimes of his or her brother. If we do not know this, perhaps we have never experienced the true power of forgiveness?

At a human rights conference in 1997, in the midst of lots of grand speeches about the call to justice, I met a man named Retosa. At lunch one day, I asked him where he was from, and what he did all day. His reply showed me what forgiveness really looks like, in practice. Restosa was from Liberia, and what he did all day was this: gathering families who had killed each other's children during the civil war together into a room to confess their sins and learn to forgive one another. "Only the person who knows the depth of their sin, and the amazing liberation of God's forgiveness, could possibly forgive such crimes from the heart" said Retosa. Perhaps that is why this extraordinary work is being undertaken by a Christian pastor rather than a social worker.

Allow me to summarise what we have noticed in this way. (1) That the church is called to be a community of forgiveness. (2) That our capacity to be a community of forgiveness is directly related to the extent to which our sins, which are many, are forgiven in Christ. And this finally: (3) that Christ's forgiveness comes alive in the world only where the church becomes the body of Christ precisely by its willingness to live in the unity of forgiven sinners. For that, my friends, is what all that talk in Matthew about binding and loosing is all about (see 18.18-20). Christ will only do in the world what his church is willing to do. For we are his body, in whom the Spirit of Christ faces this world. What we do, or do not do, is what Christ himself does. Such is Christ's vulnerability. Such, then, is our responsibility. The paradox of forgiveness is this, then: that we are forgiven only insofar as the truth of forgiveness has so penetrated our hearts that we are able to see others, also, in the mercy of Christ's grace. May God help us to forgive, and keep on forgiving, as God has forgiven us.

Let me finish with a prayer, the litany of reconciliation from Coventry Cathedral:

'All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.'

The hatred which divides nation from nation, race from race, class from class,

Father forgive.

The covetous desires of people and nations to possess what is not their own,

Father forgive.

The greed which exploits the work of human hands and lays waste the earth,

Father forgive.

Our envy of the welfare and happiness of others,
Father forgive.
Our indifference to the plight of the imprisoned, the homeless, the refugee,
Father forgive.
The lust which dishonours the bodies of men, women and children,
Father forgive.
The pride which leads us to trust in ourselves and not in God,
Father forgive.
'Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.'

Garry Deverell

The Last Will Be First

Text: Matthew 20.1-16

On Easter Monday, 1996, at the famous Stawell Gift Athletics Carnival, an extraordinary running race was held. It was the 400m handicap race for women. Now, for those of you who are unfamiliar with the language of athletics, the word 'handicap' does not here refer to a race for people with an identified disability. It refers, instead, to the practice of spacing the runners out as the race begins so that the ones with the strongest pre-race record start at 'scratch', that is, the starting line, and the other, weaker, runners are given a variety of head-starts further along the course. In theory, this means that were everyone to run their personal best times, they would all finish with a dead-heat at the finish line. On this particular occasion one runner, Catherine Astrid Salome Freeman – a sixteen year-old Aboriginal girl from Woorabinda in Queensland - was the only runner to start at scratch, and the next closest runner was placed a full 54 metres ahead of her as the race began. Some old and grainy footage of that race has been 'going viral' on social media over the past couple of weeks and it is worth a look. For it shows the young Cathy Freeman not only catching the field of white runners ahead of her, but also enduring a big shove from one of them as the field passes the 350m mark. Amazingly, Cathy keeps her form and comes home to win the event by a whisker.

That Cathy did so, and went on to become both a world and Olympic champion in this same event, is something of a modern miracle. For she is Aboriginal. She belongs to a people whose lands and waterways were stolen at the point of a gun, whose ancestors were massacred, poisoned, raped, shackled, removed from country and kin, enslaved in missions, orphanages and individual homes as domestic servants, and now continue to be the single most disadvantaged ethnic group in the country on any measure. Twice as likely to be living with a disability. 4 times more likely to live with a chronic disease. 4 times more likely to take their own lives. 37 times more likely to be imprisoned than any other Australian. 1000 times more likely to die in police custody. On that Easter Monday in 1996 Cathy was at the back of the line on handicapping. But she was also at the back of the line when it came to the likelihood that she would even be there to compete. That she was able to slip pass every single white runner, including the one who tried to take her out of the race with a physical shove, is absolutely amazing. From last in the race to first. From last in this country to sporting royalty.

The story we read just now from Matthew's gospel also talks about the last becoming first. In one of Jesus' most intriguing parables, he says that the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who has a vineyard. The landowner goes out at dawn to the marketplace in town where willing labourers are most likely to gather. He hires those who are there after agreeing to pay them the usual daily

wage, a denarius, and they head over the vineyard to pick grapes. But there are not enough labourers to secure the harvest, so the landowner goes out again at 9, 12, 3 and 5 to hire more workers.¹ Each are hired on the promise that they will be paid 'what is right' for their time. Now, at knock-off time, each of the workers are paid, beginning with the last hired, and finishing with the first. Those hired at the beginning of the day are incensed to learn that all the other workers, even those hired at 5 o'clock in the afternoon, are to be paid the full daily wage, just as they are. They complain bitterly about these latecomers 'being made equal' to themselves, even though they have worked longer. But the landowner responds 'Did you not agree to work for a denarius? That is what you have been paid. Are you calling me evil because I am generous towards these others?' And so, says Jesus after he tells his story, 'the last will be first and the first will be last'.

Now. I've used this story in bible studies across twenty-five years of ministry, and I can report that almost every white, middle-class, person who hears the story for the first time responds, like clockwork, 'but that is so unfair!' This has convinced me that many white-middle class people tend to identify most strongly with the people hired at the beginning of the day. Why? Because they are raised from birth to believe that if you don't work, you don't eat, and that justice is primarily about getting what you deserve because of your hard work. If you work hard, you rightly expect to be rewarded in proportion to the amount of work you have done. Since justice is proportional, it follows that those who work less than you should be paid less than you. Now, if that is what you believe, if life is most properly a meritocracy in which the hardest workers take the lion's share of the rewards, then the behaviour of the landowner in our parable is guaranteed to offend. For it strikes at the very heart of this white, middle-class, work-ethic. It questions, and possibly even mocks, that ethic's certainties about what is fair and what is just.

Of course, if you are white and middle-class, there are probably a lot of things that you cannot see. You may not be aware, for example, that you have a disability, an ailment that quite a few scholars are calling, very simply, 'white-blindness'. White-blindness is an incapacity to see what life might be like for people who are not white and middle-class, for people whose very different social location may teach them really quite different lessons about the world and how it works. For when I, an Aboriginal man, read this parable, I identify not with the people who were hired at the beginning of the day, but with those who were hired at 5 o'clock. For I know, deep in my marrow, that those who are ready to work at 6am in the morning enjoy a long list of advantages that I simply cannot count on. They, for example, are most likely able-bodied. They are four times as likely as I am to be able-bodied. Which gives them a significant advantage when it comes to being job-ready. The fact that they are ready to work at 6 o'clock in the morning almost certainly means that they also enjoy good mental health. I, on the other hand, do not. Generations of racism from the most powerful towards my people means that I carry with me a weight that is very, very difficult to slough off. It is difficult to get up each day with a certainty that I will be treated fairly when multiple generations before me were not. And that has been confirmed, many hundreds of times over, in my own experience. Simply by being Aboriginal, I am three times more likely to regularly experience high levels of psychological distress than other Australians, and that makes getting out of bed in the morning quite difficult, sometimes. I won't go on, but I hope you are getting the picture.

From a biblical studies point of view, it is clear that those who are more latterly hired by the landowner are very likely to have been the most marginalised members of Judean society at the time. Landless peasants who are continually exhausted because most landowners exploit their

¹ The workers are not standing 'idle' as the common translation of 'argous' has it. They are simply unemployed.

labour for pittance. Widows or 'unclean' women who have no male patriarch to protect them. Aboriginal people like the Canaanite women we encountered in chapter 15, the one whose daughter was tormented by a demon, a demon some scholars happily name 'colonisation'. And so on. They are late to marketplace because they have learned – through cold, hard, experience – that there is little to be gained by being there early. They are outcasts, they are rarely picked for the work available, and therefore there is little point in turning up at all.

If you read the parable from that point of view, then the point of the story is not about the proportionality of justice, as white middle-class social programming might suggest. It is not even about a failure of such justice. It is about *grace*, grace here defined as an excess of loving generosity toward the last and the least. To all who believe that justice is satisfied by getting what you deserve, this might come as very bad news indeed! Because if you believe in meritocracy, grace proclaims the very opposite: that it is the last and the least, those who are *least* deserving in the eyes of the meritocracy, who can expect to receive the love and mercy of the creator and landowner of all the earth.

For the vast majority of people who live on this planet, who are not white and middle-class, the grace at the heart of the parable is actually the very best of news. For it tells us that while the world run by white people may have forgotten us, if it even acknowledges our existence at all, God has not forgotten us. From the lips of Jesus, the very son of God, we learn that God will take us from our customary place at the very back of the field, and help us along, with Cathy, to the winner's podium. The last, those who get barely enough work to get by, will nevertheless be made equal with those who can depend on work every day.

Let's be clear, however, that none of this happens by magic. Faith will not, for example, immediately deliver the poor and the oppressed to the front of the queue. Faith, rather, will assure the poor one, the enslaved one, that she or he is loved, accepted and free in Christ. And this knowledge, in turn, will give her the confidence and courage to have a go, and keep having a go, even if the chips are down and the system is against you. You know, when Cathy won her gold medal at the Sydney Olympics in 2000 she had some help. She said that her ancestors rose up from the ground beneath her feet to fill her with the strength and confidence she needed to prevail against the odds. Here Cathy is speaking in an Aboriginal way about God. For us, God is at work in our ancestors, who live in the earth and flora and fauna, all about us, just as the Holy Spirit lived in Christ and now lives in his church. Cathy is saying, therefore, that the confidence and help of her ancestors filled her with everything she needed to run, and to run without giving up. God does not run the race for us. God gives us the power and courage, rather, to finish the race as equal partners in the gospel with all who have had a better start in life.

For, in the end, it is grace that saves us all, through faith, whether we are at the bottom of the social pile, or in the middle, or at the top. It is not our work, nor our status, as the most powerful would measure it. Such is the way of Christ. Such is the way of the gospel. So, on this Social Justice Sunday I leave you with just two simple challenges. If you are poor, God in Christ has come to raise you up, so trust that his grace will get you there, even to the banqueting halls of heaven. If you are wealthy, then God would have you leave those chains behind for the sake of the poorest and least. For by emptying yourselves of such riches (as Christ did) and sharing your wealth with the least (as Christ did) you will become rich in the eyes of God.

Garry Deverell