

We live in an age, in a society, where merit is everything. If we all worked harder, studied more, and obeyed the rules set by those who are already successful, then we, too, could all benefit from the wealth that is there to be had by us all. If we all gain a degree, for example, we can be guaranteed a better life. This is painfully untrue on several counts, not least because of the world's limited resources, and that it ignores the fact that many people will never make the grade; study is not their gift or capability, as illness and disability and poverty disadvantage others also. There's no merit in a society where merit is not to be had. But we are so used to this way of thinking that this parable strikes us as very odd: all right as a fable, as a utopian way of working, but surely not a business model for today. If people turn up at our door expecting help then they must do something in return. They must prove their worth; earn their keep. If they're poor it must be their own fault. They need a business plan to get them back on their feet and we'll penalise them in any way we can until they conform to the rules of meritocracy. But, as we heard in yesterday's gospel of the parable of the seed and the sower, such stories are almost designed to be misunderstood.

*His disciples asked him what this parable might mean, and he said
 'The mysteries of the kingdom of God are revealed to you but
 for the rest there are only parables, so that
 they may see but not perceive,
 listen but not understand.'*

So our understanding of this parable says something about our current understanding of God, or better, our current relationship to Christ. Which way of thinking are we most attuned to: fairness or justice according to the prevailing world's model or justice according to God? For God, for Christ, seeks the salvation of all, whether they merit it or not, to quote the *New Collegeville Biblical Commentary*:

*In God's realm, justice...does not mean getting what we deserve,
 either in terms of retribution for wrong doing or recompense for good deeds.*
 (p. 1021)

The whole point of Christ's free act of offering himself for our redemption is that all humanity is bought into a new relationship with God, one in which God does for us what we cannot do for ourselves. Good works flow from this relationship: they do not set it up. Material success may or may not flow from this, also, but does not set it up and, more importantly, is not necessarily a sign of God's favour – indeed, it can be an impediment. In other words, there is nothing we can do, or not do, to earn, or lose, God's love. God's love is not within our giving. What we can do is step into this flow of grace, this economy of gift, and allow it to flow through us. This is Paul at his best when he realises that to live or to die is not the issue but what God wants from him – for it is all Christ. This is long-term thinking as opposed to the 'get rich quick' or 'what's in it for me?' thinking of today. Step into that flow and you will understand. And there's no point in grumbling about it. It's God's economy, after all.

Br John Mayhead
 Monastery of Christ Our Saviour