

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

Your Thoughts, Not Mine

The parable of the workers in the market-place reminds us forcefully of the limitation of our understanding of God. The first men to be hired, who can eventually say *We have borne the burdens and heat of the day*, are representative of all of us wiseacres who claim to know a bit about the motives of God. But what *do* we know? St Paul was pretty wise, we feel, and yet he says: *How impossible to penetrate his motives or understand his methods! Who has known the mind of God?*

“To Justify The Ways Of God To Man”

That was the grandiloquent aim Milton had in writing *Paradise Lost*. I always think it is rather sad. Most readers today find Milton’s God utterly incredible. What he was attempting was what theologians call *theodicy*, a way of describing God’s actions which would appeal to human ideas of justice and worth. There is a huge arrogance about this, like that of writers who tell us what Shakespeare “really meant”. What he really meant is what he wrote; if any of those critics can write better than Shakespeare, let them write deeper and greater poetry than he did; if not, don’t offer to *explain* him with lesser words!

Letting God Be God

Perhaps a better, humbler programme is to fall regularly silent before the ways of a God who has no duty to justify himself, who is not on trial before any human judge, and whose characteristic is the confounding of human processes by the sheer abundance and freedom of his life. Job, the patron saint of all the devastated, goes through many chapters of theodicy before realising that the God he cannot understand is the Creator of all understanding, and that the deeds of God predate and transcend all human commentary upon them. In human growing-up, we gradually turn from seeing other people in terms of *what they can do for us*, and gradually learn to appreciate them for *what they are in themselves*. Since God has chosen to teach us about himself through our relationships with one another, I think it is clear that there’s a great need for us to stop asking childish questions, and to begin to share that attitude of silent attention which is called *contemplation*. Some people may find this sounds too passive; but I don’t think it is.

“You Have Treated Us All The Same!”

The complaint of the tired vineyard-worker is heavy with irony. The “sameness” lies in the amount the owner pays his workers. Indeed, the money *is* the same; but its being given to all the workers equally is precise evidence that God does *not* treat us all the same. He treats those who are in greater need with greater kindness; that is how he can be called accurately kind. He does not impose human justice on them, for the satisfaction of those who think they deserve more in human eyes. Satisfaction on the part of those who worked all day, on seeing the late-comers rewarded less, has no value in the eyes of the Master. He gives the latecomers “a fair wage”; and indeed they have just as much *need* of a denarius a day as their more hard-working colleagues. What is impressive is the question of the master: *Are you envious because I am generous?*

Sinners Understand Better

We can readily understand the truth of Jesus’ constant discovery, that sinful people are readier to accept his gift of grace than the devout. If you try to enter into God’s house with your filled-out, up-to-date merit-card proudly displayed, you may be dismayed by the God you meet. He will be upsettingly unimpressed, disappointingly subversive. In this you will find yourself like those day-long weary workers: in the sad case of being *offended by the goodness of God*. There is no grace that can reach such a condition. It must come as close as we can reasonably imagine to the dread state of damnation itself.
Fr Philip