

### You get what you need - Pentecost 17/23

Where were you between August 15th and August 18th, 1969? Perhaps if I give you an auditory clue, you might make the connection.

You have to imagine a rather scruffy girl wearing sort of Afghan coat, who comes onto a stage with a bottle of Southern Comfort in her pocket, and the needle marks from her last shot of 'H' still fresh in her arm.

She comes up to the microphone and tries hard to make sense - and then, with a voice like worn tires on gravel, she belts this out:-

'Oh Lord, won't you buy me a Mercedes-Benz, my friends all drive Porches, I must make amends, I've worked all my life with no help

from my friends, Oh Lord, won't you buy me a Mercedes-Benz!'

Actually, only some of the picture I have painted of Woodstock in the epic concert of 1969 is true. Everything I've said about Janice Joplin is true - except she didn't sing that song in her set on the Woodstock stage. It wasn't recorded until October 1st, 1970 - three days before she died of a heroin overdose at the age of 27, and three weeks after her close friend Jimi Hendrix died of a barbiturate overdose at the same age.

There are a number of ways in which one might view today's gospel, and that probably isn't one of them. Or is it?

Today's gospel is about entitlement; 'I think I should get what I think I deserve.'

It is more than just 'keeping up with the Jones', it is about out-doing the Jones' - 'my friends all drive Porsches, I must make amends'. I must out-do you - I must be better than you, richer than you, more important than you...after all, I'm worth more than you.

Look where that argument can take us! Should one sex be paid more than another? Should one race be better than another? What denotes

what a person is worth? The colour of their skin? The shape of their body? The genitalia they have - or don't have? The work they do? The faith they state they believe in? Where they were born? - Your turn, you think up a few.

In recent years we have been inundated with protests and banners that state, 'Black Lives Matter!' - and 'Every Child Matters!' - and now, with abortion as a major issue on the south side of the Great Divide - equally vociferous groups chanting that 'women's choices matter', and that 'foetuses have rights too!'

Never mind the Pride marches and Multi-Gender parades.

I watched a recent debate on You Tube, in which the clash between so-called 'male toxicity' and feminism raised its ugly head. Interestingly, it was a psychologist who noted that the differential pay scales between men and women in the workplace were usually the result of men being 'less agreeable' than women. I'm sure some of you ladies here might agree with that statement - but, you see, it hasn't done you any good! If you were less agreeable and more assertive, you would go and ask for a raise, and make yourself a pain in the backside of your employer until you got the equal pay you deserve.

So our gospel is about what we think we deserve. The whole day workers agreed to work for one denarius; and at various periods throughout the day, the employer goes out and hires more men who are loafing about. He even hires those who only have time to work for one hour. At the end of the day, all the workers are given the same wage - and, quite naturally, those who worked the whole day begin to grumble, thinking they should have been given more - the Mercedes-Benz.

Let's think of another way to look at it. The analogy isn't perfect, but then, surprisingly enough, neither am I!

Let us say that there is a train standing at the station, and it is about to go; a would-be passenger comes belting down the platform, lugging his case and panting as the train begins to roll. You can open the door and help him on - or you can push him away and leave him in a heap on the platform. He has a ticket too - so doesn't he have the right to ride the train as well?

There are various commentaries on this passage of Matthew, ranging from banal children's stories, to deeper theological insights.

Given that we read in the final verse of today's passage that this is about generosity, we can

infer from that that we are talking about God's grace.

Perhaps my train station story is not the best analogy. I'll try again; when I was a young teenager, I used to holiday on a farm in France. The farmer raised stud bulls, and had ten children, so it seemed appropriate. I was hardly noticed at the dining table as an add-on, but I was expected to do my share of the chores around the house and farm, along with the other kids. One year I got sick, and was put to bed by Madame, who tucked me up with a hot toddy of warm milk, sugar, and rum. I slept like a baby all day, and felt a whole lot better in the evening.

Now I hadn't done any chores all day, and had been happily snoring my fever away in bed - but I was fed along with the other children. Madame did not withhold my food because I hadn't worked all day. To her, I was just another one of her family that needed feeding. I think that is what Jesus is telling us God is like, whenever we come to him in need.

When we allow ourselves to read the gospel passage with resentment and a sense of entitlement, it is germane to remind ourselves of a poem that I came across long ago, and may be familiar to some of you:-

*'I dreamed death came the other night, and heaven's gates swung wide.*

*With kindly grace an angel stood and ushered me inside.*

*And there to my astonishment, stood folks I had known before,*

*Some I had judged and labeled, "Unfit for heaven's door."*

*Indignant words rose to my lips but never were set free,*

*For every face showed stunned surprise.*

*No one expected me.'*

But let me come back to Janice Joplin's Mercedes-Benz. And with it, a verse - again from Matthew's gospel - this time chapter 6,

verse 8; 'Your Father knows what you need before you ask him.'

God knew she didn't need a Mercedes-Benz - just because all her friends drove Porsches.

In the same way, my person rushing for their train didn't need a private jet - just a ticket to ride the train; and I didn't need a four course meal from Madame on the farm - just enough to sustain me.

It is likely that the man who was paid the same denarius for one hour's work also had a family to feed, and had been looking for work all day. The point is that God's grace gave him what he needed - not what he might have deserved or the other workers felt was his due.

I have to share again the message I had on Thursday and shared at Morning Prayer. The Scottish theologian Alastair Begg, who asks in one of his sermons, 'If you were to die tonight and were trying to gain entry into heaven, what would you say?.'

And he makes the point that if you begin to answer the question in the first person, you are doomed from the outset; 'Because I believe; because I have faith; because I am this or that...'

He emphasizes that the only way to answer the question is in the third person; 'Because He.'

Think about it, he says, I can't wait to meet the thief on the cross next to Jesus, and ask

him 'How did that work out for you?' Because there you were, cussing the guy out with your mate, you never went to bible study, you never got baptized, you didn't know a thing about church membership, and yet - you made it!

The angel must have said much the same - 'Well, what are you doing here?' And the man says, 'Well I don't know,"What do you mean - you don't know?'

'Well, because I don't know!'

'Excuse me, let me get my supervisor...'

The supervisor comes along and says, 'Son, we've got just a few questions for you...are you clear on the doctrine of justification by faith?'

The guy says, 'I've never heard of it in my life'.

The supervisor says, 'Let's just go to the

doctrine of scripture immediately...'. And the guy's just staring at him, and eventually, in frustration, the supervisor asks, 'On what basis are you here?'

And he said, 'Because the man on the middle cross said I can come.'

We get what we need. Even the Rolling Stones realized this in 1969 - that same year as the legendary Woodstock Festival, when they brought out their album, 'Let it bleed', which featured the song, 'You can't always get what you want...' and continues with the lyric, '...but if you try sometimes, you just might find you get what you need.'

And that brings me full circle back to our gospel, where the owner of the vineyard makes sure that all his workers 'get what they need'.

It is sad and ironic to note that when Janice Joplin died of a heroin overdose, her Porsche was sitting in the parking lot of her hotel.

She really didn't need a Mercedes-Benz.