Assessing Claims and Detaining God

A sermon on Luke 16:1-13; Jeremiah 8:18 - 9:1; & 1 Timothy 2:1-7 by Nathan Nettleton, 18 September 2016

Message
God longs to bless us far more than we deserve, but if we don't contribute to a culture of extravagant grace, we are unlikely to be able to receive it.

Sermon

Most of us know and hate the feeling of being assessed. We experience it in all kinds of contexts. Acacia is about to sit her final year 12 exams, and Francisco is working his butt off trying to complete a thesis that is due in a few weeks. They are facing tough assessments. We are assessed for suitability when we apply for a job, or for parole, or for rental accommodation, or for a loan, or for a social security benefit. We are assessed by potential friends and lovers. We are assessed by the many who judge our possessions and position and obsess over social status. Over and over we find that whether or not we are welcome in this place or that is based on an assessment of our suitability.

One of the reasons we resent being assessed and judged worthy of welcome or not, is that assessments are seldom generous, often not even fair, and sometime downright harsh and prejudiced. We find ourselves wishing over and over that the world was more generous and that things would be more easily tipped in our favour. But how often is the world like that?

These questions came up in several different ways in all three of tonight's bible readings, and I'm going to attempt to draw the threads together.

In the gospel reading we heard Jesus telling one of his more perplexing parables. The parable ends up commending someone who has been assessed as being guilty of some shifty business practices, so it has caused all sorts of headaches for interpreters who mistakenly expected Jesus to be a consistent champion of the respectable and law-abiding.

It become a little more understandable if we notice its relationship with the story that comes immediately before it. In both the parable of the prodigal son and the parable of the shifty business manager, the central characters are described as "squandering property", and are then confronted with the prospect of homelessness and poverty line jobs. Both then ask themselves, "What am I going to do now? How am I going to make myself welcome again?" And both end up finding themselves treated far far better than they expected or deserved.

So when we read them in light of each other, we can see how these parables speak directly into our anxieties about being assessed, our fears of being judged unwelcome, and our longing to be assessed generously and made welcome and treated better than we deserve or could hope to expect. And they tell us that God, far from being a harsh and capricious judge, is deeply in love with us and longing to welcome us home and shower us with blessings, far more than we could ever deserve or hope to expect, no matter what we have done or where we come from or how much we have squandered our opportunities.

So why do we so seldom experience life like that? Why does it more often feel like we are always at the mercy of harsh judges and prejudiced assessments? Why is it that so many people so often can relate more easily to the words we heard from the prophet Jeremiah?

Hear the cry of my poor people
from far and wide in the land:
Has the Lord given up on us?

Seasons and years come and go,
and still we are not saved.
For the pain of my poor people I am hurting,
I mourn, and dismay has taken hold of me.

When we put these parables about a desperate longing to find places of welcome without being assessed too harshly alongside that picture of pain and despair, we will probably all have personal stories or incidents in which we relate to it, and that challenges us to ask what sort of world we live in, what sort of culture we are surrounded by, if it leaves so many of us feeling judged and unwelcome. These things are seldom isolated. We build these things into our culture and pass them along, and if we have built a culture where everyone is constantly assessed and only some are made welcome, then we will probably all be victims of it at least some of the time.

This week we witnessed a newly elected politician in our national parliament calling for a radical religious-based tightening of our immigration assessment criteria, so that those who might be judged to be a threat to our culture might not be welcomed in. Therein lies the tragic irony. Being judgemental and unwelcoming to whoever are the current wave of refugees or immigrants seeking a better life is indeed an entrenched part of Australian culture, but is it an aspect of our culture that we want to perpetuate when we all fear living under it ourselves?

Does not the situation of the asylum seekers in our offshore detention centres represent an extreme form of the desperation for a non-judgemental welcome depicted in our parable and an extreme form of precisely what we most fear being subjected to ourselves? The official line is that we have to assess them all carefully to ensure that they are deserving of welcome into our country. It is also officially admitted that we are using a harsh refusal of welcome to deter other unworthies from coming, so people are facing a tortuous deprivation of all hope, with no realistic prospect of ever finding a welcome. As Jeremiah cried, "Has the Lord given up on us? Seasons and years come and go, and still there is no hope."

The Nauru files that the *Love makes a Way* mob spent hours reading out in public outside the Department of Immigration this week contain a mountain of reports of the consequent self-harm, sexual assaults, child abuse, hunger strikes, assaults and injuries inside the detention centres. Patrick McGorry, mental health expert and former Australian of the Year, spoke out this week about the incalculable psychological harm being caused and called for an urgent end to the detention, and resettlement in the Australian community. He pointed out that the original stated aim of deterring further arrivals is no longer relevant. The boats have been stopped and now welcoming those who have already arrived won't change that.

Even the economists are reaching the same conclusions. The Age's economics editor this week pointed out that the government's so called omnibus of budget savings could be replaced by simply closing down the immigration detention centres. Australia is spending more than $573,000 per year on each offshore detainee, and as the economic's editor points

out, not only is this not in return for their contribution to society, it is being paid to prevent them contributing to society. He says this is what economists call "deliberately or carelessly deprecating human capital", and that it is not only economic insanity, but "perhaps the worst crime against humanity."

So if it is causing massive harm, makes no economic sense, and targets a problem that no longer exists, we have to face the uncomfortable truth that its continuation is actually cultural. It continues because enough of us fear that these people are a threat to our culture, and yet at the same time, whenever we are facing assessment ourselves, we long for a culture that would be more generous in its assessments and would look for reason to welcome us in rather than reasons to shut us out.

If we truly want that world, we are going to have to build it, one little opportunity at a time. Are we building a culture where we constantly subject others to assessment, to measurement, to weighing up, with a view to excluding those who we deem undeserving? Or are we building a culture of generous hospitality where the doors are always open and the welcome mats are always out?

Of course, faced with the atrocities of our offshore detention system, the easy thing for us to do is to point the finger of blame at our politicians and distance ourselves from them. But that can very easily tip into another expression of the same tendency to inhospitable behaviour, based on equally harsh and dismissive assessments of their performance. If we want to change the culture, it is going to have to include the way we treat our politicians, even when we strongly disagree with them.

It is interesting how the Apostle Paul singles out political leaders for special mention when he urged us to pray for everyone in tonight's second reading. Presumably he singles them out because they are the people we are most likely to angrily exclude from our prayers. Back then, the political leaders were the Roman occupation forces, and people were more likely to pray against them than pray for them. Most of us don't feel anything like the same fear and resentment towards our politicians, although if we were living in the detention camps on Nauru or Manus Island we probably would, but the challenge to pray for them still feels like a jarring challenge. I know it does to me anyway.

Bishop Tom Wright warns us against "the simplistic agendas ... that suggest you should either idolise your present political system or work to overthrow it." Praying *for* them doesn't mean accepting bad policies, or standing by silently when they trample roughshod over the basic human rights of some of the world's most unfortunate and vulnerable people. But it does mean that, even as we call for the overturning of bad policy, we treat them as human beings worthy of respect and mercy and hospitality. And worthy of our prayers.

These things are all about building a culture, building the kind of culture we actually want to live in, a culture of such generosity that we no longer need to feel anxious about being assessed because we are always cut plenty of slack and treated far better than we deserve. It is another expression of what Jesus said about treating others the way we would want to be treated. If we want to be welcomed mercifully and generously and hospitably, then we need to contribute to a culture of such things by treating others mercifully, generously and hospitably, whether they be asylum seekers or political leaders or anyone in between.

And as Jesus says in his comments following the parable, we should use whatever resources and means are at our disposal to do that, to bless others and thus increase the likelihood of them blessing others in turn. Whether it be money or land or possessions or social and human capital, use them as far as is possible to create and spread a culture of mercy and generosity and welcome and hospitality. And when the issues are bigger than just our little circles, advocate too for our nation to do that with its land and its money and its capacity to welcome and bless others.

There is no question that the God made known to us in Jesus longs to shower us with love and mercy and extravagant generosity. God is not interested in assessing and measuring and means testing us at all. The parables of the dishonest manager and the prodigal son illustrate the welcoming of the undeserving, not a select entry system. God wants us to know love and grace far beyond anything we could ever deserve or earn. But no matter how much God yearns for it, it is almost impossible for us to receive and enjoy something we don't really believe in. We are almost inevitably victims of the culture we believe in and create and invest in. If we lock ourselves into a narrow and stingy culture that suspiciously assesses everyone and says that nothing good will ever be made available to those who can't prove themselves deserving, then we will live out our days under the harsh tight-fisted gaze of a god we have made in our own image.

Seasons and years will come and go and still we will not be saved, and the God who longs to gather us up in loving arms and shower us with undeserved gifts will continue to sit on Manus Island and despair, having been assessed as unworthy and unwelcome.

In this place, at this table, let's begin building another culture, the welcoming culture known as the kingdom of God.