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Envy & Gratitude

By Jessica Dalton

Our Gospel reading this morning talks about envy. In the original Greek for this passage in the New Testament, where modern translations say "envious" or "envy" or "jealousy," the Greek has a phrase that translates as "the evil eye." There is a belief across much of the ancient world—and still today—that when people are envious of things that other people have, they look on them with the evil eye to destroy them.

That is what envy is. It's an experience of wanting to destroy something that someone else has because you want it so badly. You want it so badly, you want to possess it and own it for yourself, that you can't bear for anyone else to have it.

We can probably all think of small or very large and tragic examples of where that happens in society and in relationships. The Greek phrase "the evil eye" is a good description of what envy is. It's a very destructive anger. When you look on something in envy, you look at it in order to bring evil to it, to strip it of goodness.

Different cultures have developed different ways of responding to this phenomenon of envy. In some Jordanian communities, families make a strict rule that they don't post pictures of their children online because they don't want people to look enviously at their family. They believe that such envious looks might bring some evil intent that will be born out of envy.

Envy is a terribly destructive emotion. When it overwhelms us, it can be very painful. It can cause us to behave badly and in ways that don't align with our values.

The Roots of Envy: A Child's Discovery

Envy is also one of our earliest emotional experiences. At some point when we are very little, we eventually become aware that we are not the only person in our mother's eyes or our carer's eyes, whoever is looking after us. We realise that she has relationships with other people, with a partner. We realise that she loves other people. We realise that we have to share her.

Many of us who have our own children or grandchildren, or who know the children of friends, will have witnessed the agony that babies suffer when they are separated from their

caregiver or left with a nanny or other carers. Envy is a very formative and painful experience for babies, and it's all tied up with the realisation that they are separate from their carers and that their carer has other relationships.

In a good childhood situation, the baby gradually learns that the mother has capacity for many relationships. She has enough love and attention for her child and for others. Limitless love to go around, like the limitless chocolate buttons in our demonstration earlier. But in a less ideal situation—for all sorts of reasons, whether external circumstances of growing up in periods of great conflict or unrest, or internal within the family dynamic—the child doesn't learn this. They might become terrified of not having enough love or enough care.

As they become an adult, they adapt ways of living that help them to feel safe in what has become quite a chaotic internal experience. Envy then often comes with what can be seen as a state of entitlement. You can see people appear spoiled, demanding what they believe to be theirs. But that can often stem from a terrible kind of primal anxiety.

The Labourers in the Vineyard

The workers in the parable of the labourers in the vineyard display this dynamic perfectly. They are like the child who doesn't understand that there is enough love and attention to go around. The early workers think: "That money should be mine. I've worked much harder than these other labourers."

That entitlement leads to a terrible sense of insecurity and fragility. These people have taken what rightfully belongs to me. That's my money. And I'm frightened. What more might then be taken from me? When I come tomorrow to work, will the same thing happen? Will more people hear of this generous offer and there won't be any money, any work left for me?

But just as the child in an ideal situation can learn that the mother's love is more expansive than they imagined, the workers in our story are also invited to see that in fact there is more than enough to go around.

It is very important that we stop and notice in the story that the first labourers are still paid the rate that was agreed. Sometimes, without realising it, we can think that the story means a set of people were promised to be paid a certain amount and then at the end of the day they got less because some of it was given to the labourers that came late. That isn't what happens.

The first labourers get the amount of money they were expecting and that had been agreed. They are paid what they were told they would be paid. The agreement is honoured and it is honest. But the people that came at the end of the day are offered the same. The paying of the late arrivals does not mean that the early workers don't also have sufficient. Everyone in

the story has enough. The labourers that come late having plenty doesn't mean that the labourers that came first have less.

Learning That There Is Enough

I am reminded particularly today because of my own experience both as an older sibling and having two children, one of whom has just turned one. Think of the child who has just gained a little brother or a little sister—an experience that many of us have had or have witnessed.

Gradually, the older sibling hopefully learns that the parents have more than enough love for both of them. The love that they have for the new baby does not diminish the love for the child. I'm sure we all either said ourselves or know stories of older siblings who, after a couple of weeks when the novelty of the new baby wears off, say something along the lines of what I apparently said when my sister was 10 days old: "When are we taking her back to the baby shop?"

My mother had to very gently explain that my life had changed and wasn't changing back again. But of course, in time I learned that it didn't mean that I got less. I got exactly what I had expected and got before. But there was more than enough for everybody.

This is the lesson the early workers must learn. It is the lesson Exodus teaches us as well. God provides manna in the wilderness—enough for each day, with an extra portion on the sixth day. God's abundance meets the needs of all the people. No one lacks.

We are invited to see that in fact there is more than enough to go around. Stop looking with the evil eye at what others have. God's generosity isn't a fixed pie where your gain is my loss. God's abundance is bigger than your fear of scarcity. There is always more to go around.