

Sermon for Trinity 15 September 20<sup>th</sup> 2020

Matthew 20.1–16

It is not that long since this reading came up for our midweek services, so there is an element of déjà vu about today. However, we weren't all present that day, so hopefully this is fresh for some of us, and not too much of a repeat for others.

“That's not a very fair way to treat people”, said one of my church members in Coventry as she said goodbye at the door. She was someone who had a real sense of justice for the working person. She was disturbed about the injustice of this parable. There were people who had been working all day long only getting paid the same as those who got roped in for the final hour of the working day. How could Jesus be condoning such an apparent unfairness in the remuneration of workers?

Perhaps you felt that, too, as you heard the story.

First of all we should notice that this story is taken from very much a real-life scenario. Men (and it would be men) went down to the marketplace in the hope of a day's work, and estate managers were sent to recruit the workers who looked the most promising. We can imagine that some got work because they had a good reputation. New people probably got overlooked unless they looked fit and strong for the labour required. Some would get left behind, waiting around in the hope that more help might be needed later, or someone would have to go home sick or injured and a replacement would be sought. Some would get no work at all that day.

And in a society with no benefits, no welfare, and no work contracts and protection it was a fragile existence. Upset a manager, and there would be no work tomorrow. Get ill and there would be no income until you were better. Get an injury and you might never earn again. That meant some people had to beg or steal to survive, unless they had family or friends who could help them.

If this all seems ancient history, the same scene would be there at docksides in much more recent history than the Bible, and migrant workers today still get work at the whim of the team leaders.

So using this vivid scene, familiar to his listeners, Jesus presents them and us with this strange behaviour by an employer. It's no way to guarantee good industrial relations and a coherent workforce. You couldn't run an economy like this. And how stupid is the proprietor to pay excess amount of money to the latecomers.

That's why we need to stop and remind ourselves that this is a parable. Jesus isn't telling this story to explain to us how to run a vineyard; he's telling us about the Kingdom of Heaven. In other words, he's explaining what God is like, and how he treats his people. And

we know that Jesus would have in mind listeners who thought that they were definitely first in the queue for any rewards that God might be giving out.

Remember the parable of the Prodigal Son? Jesus tells that story of how the older brother looks on with jealousy as the wayward son is welcomed home. He resents his father's generosity and the good treatment his brother receives. He completely fails to appreciate what he already has. The lesson here is similar.

Have you ever been at a buffet tea where there are lots of cakes? Sometimes there's a really nice cake, cut up into slices, but there are only 8 pieces. And you're in a queue, wondering whether the nice cake will run out before you get there, willing everyone else to walk past so that it doesn't.

Jesus is teaching us that God isn't like that, and neither are the gifts that He gives. God doesn't have a limited supply of love, grace, forgiveness, or indeed his Holy Spirit. It won't run out if lots of other people get there first, and it won't go short if lots of other people find Him after us. So God's grace isn't like that cake at the buffet – it's not in limited portions and a limited supply.

Neither is God's grace like wages. That's why Jesus makes this story such an outrageous injustice – precisely to get our attention and to illustrate the point. If God's love, mercy, forgiveness and grace were earned, then of course it would be unjust if he gave the latecomers the same as the rest of us. But they're not; they're a gift, and gifts aren't earned. They are not allocated in terms of how much you worked. Gifts are a sign of relationship, and God gives without holding back, because He is love and He loves us.

“Are you envious because I am generous?” That's the question asked by the owner of the vineyard. When we have all of the love, mercy, grace, compassion, and forgiveness that we could ever want or need, what point is there in being jealous of others? We should rather rejoice that they, too, have found what we have already discovered.

Amen.