

**Sunday 20th September 2020**

**Sermon Trinity 15 2020 Matthew 20.1-16**

**Preacher: Revd Jane Quinton, Curate**

One of the key themes in Matthew's gospel is the idea of the kingdom of heaven; and many of the stories he tells **about** Jesus and the parables he recounts **of** Jesus are intended to help people understand what **God's** kingdom is like.... *and* to identify differences between **God's** kingdom and the world Jesus encounters in the Israel of his time.

This parable of the labourers in the vineyard is such an example, and his listeners would have been amazed at what it might say about God; and **God's** very odd sense of fairness.

But before we come to the parable itself let's just look at its context. At this point Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem for his final days on earth and if he doesn't get his message across to his disciples now he won't get much more

chance to do so. In the previous chapter two things point to what this parable is saying.

First when his disciples try and stop the children coming to Jesus, he chides them, saying “let the children come” because “it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs.” Which is curious because children were right at the bottom of the pecking order in those times – definitely to be seen and not heard. Yet Jesus says – **they are** the ones to whom the kingdom of heaven belongs: those who are as nothing in this world will be cherished and welcomed in **God’s** kingdom.

Then there’s the story of the rich young man who has religiously followed the Torah, (the law and the commandments) all his life (which people assumed would get them a great place in heaven). Yet Jesus tells him that even better than dutifully following the law would be to sell everything he had, give it to the poor and then follow Jesus. **Then** he would find real treasure in heaven.

Because worldly wealth and worldly ranking just won’t do it! ....“For many who are first will be last and the last

first”, Jesus says..... almost identical words to those at the end of today’s parable. So they’re linked!

So what about today’s parable? Here, the landowner (God!) chooses labourers to work in his vineyard .... and we hear how he chooses to pay them.

Now he collects the first group of men from the market place (where labourers would wait to show themselves available for hire) at 9am and agrees to pay them ‘the usual daily wage’. That would be one denarius – the amount it would cost an average family to meet its daily needs.

But when the owner goes later at different times to hire more labourers, he first checks why they aren’t already working; and when they say no one’s hired them, he takes them on and agrees to pay them “whatever is right”.

And so to the payment. Now in those days Jewish law said that labourers had to be paid at the end of each day so that they could feed themselves and their family.... And

that's what happens here. However, it was very odd to pay the latest recruits first and the first recruits last....

And when the owner starts by paying the latest recruits **one denarius** each, everyone listening to the story will have been waiting with anticipation to discover what he might pay those who have been labouring all day.

However, they, like us now possibly, and like those early recruits in the parable, will have been outraged when they find that they get the same wage as the last workers!

But the owner replies to the one who complains: Friend I'm doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage... What is it to you if I also choose to give these others the same amount? Are you envious because I am generous? So the last will be first and the first last."

So what is 'last first and first last' about? What **is** the kingdom of heaven like?

Well it's not about the order in which they get paid, that's for sure!

Rather, Jesus is saying ‘the kingdom of heaven is like “GRACE”.

God’s grace to us, his overflowing and bountiful **generosity** toward all his children is quite separate from anything we think we might have **earned** from God. The landowner doesn’t pay the labourers according to what **they** think they’ve EARNED. Rather he pays them so that each of them has their needs met. One denarius for their work in the fields will help each labourer look after his family’s basic needs. Those who came to the fields first can look after their families ... so they’re not being hard done by. And those who come later to the fields – through no fault of their own but rather because they hadn’t been hired earlier - they too get *enough* to look after their families. So God’s grace is about ensuring that everyone has **enough** irrespective of what they think they’ve earned.

But perhaps Jesus is also saying something here about status and ranking – and that our earthly ways of ranking

people are not God's ways. Rather God's ways turn our ways upside down....

therefore although adults rank before children in our world, children come first in God's kingdom;

that those who keep the law in a mechanistic way will come behind those who live by discernment for the greater good;

that those with worldly goods will come behind the poor of this world;

and that the religious leaders – the pharisees and the scribes (who did indeed think they were better than the rest) will come behind those whom society shuns – the prostitutes and tax collectors, the homeless and outcasts: those who are often much more aware of their need for God and their inability to do anything in their own strength.

Jesus tells us that God's grace is bountiful but we cannot and should not try to compare ourselves with others or

work out how much 'grace' we deserve because we can't **earn** grace! It is pure gift.

So, rather, Jesus says, God's topsy turvy ways mean that 'Whoever wishes to be great must be a servant' and 'all who exalt themselves will be humbled'. ***That is what God's kingdom looks like..... and what he longs to see as he seeks to build his heavenly kingdom here on earth.***