

TRINITY 15 – Matthew 20: 1-16 – Workers in the vineyard

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Whenever I read this parable I always think of my great-aunt, who became a Christian quite late in her life (*and* initially with some reluctance!)

I used to visit her regularly and loved hearing her talk about God. And on this one occasion she had greeted me with particular excitement, saying that God had spoken to her that morning. She then read me *this* parable, and then, with her eyes sparkling, told me how for so long she had been sorry that she had not accepted God earlier in her life; but, that as she'd read this story of the workers in the vineyard that morning, she'd suddenly realised God was saying to her, "that's you Doris, one of those last workers – it doesn't matter that you waited so long, you're mine now, and you're working in my vineyard just as I want you to'.

I acknowledge that my aunt gave me a new and different perspective on this parable from that day, which I think is very important and which I will come back to..

But today's story of the workers in the vineyard, has always evoked a similar emotional response in me to that of the parable of the Prodigal Son.... a story which I always remember when I was in church a few years ago, and the kids returned after having been at Sunday school, and after the Sunday School teacher had told us that they had been discussing the story of the Prodigal Son that day, he then asked one of the kids to explain what they'd learnt. And this boy just came forward

and blurted out, “well I didn’t understand it, it just seems that God’s not fair!”

My heart went out to this Sunday School teacher..... because really? Isn’t that what many, if not all of us, including myself, have thought as we’ve read both these parables - ‘that actually it doesn’t seem fair!’

Which is interesting, because it means that we have read both these stories from a certain perspective. From the perspective of the ‘grumbling’ workers who had worked all day but still only received the same amount as those who worked for just an hour; or the perspective of the ‘sulky’ son who didn’t want to join in the celebrations when his brother came home because he was upset that his dad had never put on such a celebration for him who had obediently stayed at home working for his dad whilst his brother went off and frittered away all his inheritance.

Our perspectives sympathising, because of a sense of injustice for both these parties.

So as Jesus is referring to God and the kingdom of heaven in both these parables, are we to presume that God and His kingdom aren’t fair....?! Or is this maybe a case of us needing to look at our own perspective and question whether that is always fair.....?

Because in both stories we can’t really criticize either the landowner or the father – they don’t actually do anything wrong..... they just show an enormous amount of generous love and compassion.....

And isn’t this just what we all want to be shown, and to be given in our own lives?

In today's parable, the landowner is constantly entering the market place throughout the day looking for anyone who needs work. And even those who nobody else has wanted and who still find themselves waiting there at the end of the day, are hired by this landowner and then consequently paid exactly what they need. Because be assured that in those days a full day's pay would have been exactly what the man will have needed in order to feed his family that night, nothing less would have done.

Don't we all just need and want to receive that similar grace shown by the landowner in this story.

Our parable today reveals that we have a God who:

keeps His word,
is generous beyond measure,
who doesn't reject anyone who comes to Him,
treats everyone fairly,
and who is constantly searching for each one of us.

And having experienced God's goodness, grace and generosity ourselves do we really want to stop others receiving it?!!
Because to experience God's love and forgiveness through Jesus, to know His provision, and to be able to rest in His peace and know His constant presence with us, His help and strength and comfort through all that we experience..... is the best gift in the world. It is life-changing, bringing us into God's kingdom. A kingdom which is not about status and ranking and earning and deserving anything – but is about receiving God's gifted grace to us, and passing it on to others. Because Kingdom-living sees things from God's perspective....

My great-aunt eventually died when she was 102, but she had known and loved the Lord and worked as part of His kingdom on earth for 33 years. She knew that it doesn't matter how and at what age somebody enters the kingdom of heaven, they are always welcome and as precious to God as the next person. And she did think similarly to the young boy in church a few years ago that God wasn't fair. But her perspective of that was that God was indeed too generous beyond measure!

Constantly out in the market-place, looking for the people everybody else has ignored, welcoming them on the same terms, and surprising them (and everybody else) with His limitless, all-inclusive grace.....

AMEN