

Collect, Readings and Sermon for Sunday 20th September 2020
Fifteenth Sunday after Trinity

Collect

Lord God,
defend your Church from all false teaching
and give to your people knowledge of your truth,
that we may enjoy eternal life
in Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

Philippians 1:21-end

For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain. If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labour for me; and I do not know which I prefer. I am hard pressed between the two: my desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better; but to remain in the flesh is more necessary for you. Since I am convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with all of you for your progress and joy in faith, so that I may share abundantly in your boasting in Christ Jesus when I come to you again.

Only, live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that, whether I come and see you or am absent and hear about you, I will know that you are standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel, and are in no way intimidated by your opponents. For them this is evidence of their destruction, but of your salvation. And this is God's doing. For he has graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well—since you are having the same struggle that you saw I had and now hear that I still have.

Matthew 20:1-16

'For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire labourers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the labourers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. When he went out about nine o'clock, he saw others standing idle in the market-place; and he said to them, "You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right." So they went. When he went out again about noon and about three o'clock, he did the same. And about five o'clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, "Why are you standing here idle all day?" They said to him, "Because no one has hired us." He said to them, "You also go into the vineyard." When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, "Call the labourers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first." When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, saying, "These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat." But he replied to one of them, "Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?" So the last will be first, and the first will be last.'

Sermon

We don't need to spend very long in a school playground, or indeed in a family home before we hear that familiar cry: "It's not fair!" It seems that the sense of fairness and justice is one of the most innate, especially when we feel that we are on the wrong side of the equation. Perhaps that is why, across the generations, Jesus knew that we would all be able to relate to the parable of the labourers in the vineyard.

I mentioned last week that it is important not to see parables as an allegory, where different characters represent, for example, God. Rather, we need to allow ourselves to enter into the story and experience it in a way that can speak to us today.

In many ways, this is a rather perplexing story. Generosity undoubtedly appears to be crucial – and we'll come back to that later. But it is hard not to be perplexed by the behaviour of the landowner. And that is why I caution against simply assuming that the landowner represents God.

In the story, the landowner requires labourers for his vineyard, so he goes out early in the morning to hire them from the market-place. Every few hours, he goes out again, and seeing more people in need of work, he hires additional labourers throughout the day. It's probably worth pressing pause here as there are a few things we don't know. Is the landowner so successful that, as the day progresses, he realises that he requires additional labour? Or is he simply passing by the market-place, and on seeing people still out of work, he simply can't stop himself from hiring them? We don't know the answer, but already we can see that this parable may have different things to teach each one of us. If you run a business, do you employ the bare minimum staff in order to maximise your profits? Or do you seek to employ a few more, perhaps training up young people, or ensuring there is capacity in case of sickness. Of course, which of those options is possible and prudent will depend on the economic situation, among other things.

Perhaps you're already beginning to see that parables really can continue to speak to us, because circumstances are never the same each time we hear them.

As the story continues, we understand that in all five sets of workers have been hired, at intervals between early morning and 5 pm. At the end of the day, it is the manager who doles out the wages. Beginning with those who arrived last, he gives them the full daily wage, and then proceeds to give each worker exactly the same wage.

If ever the phrase "it's not fair" was appropriate, it might surely be here. After all, we are used to a world in which we are paid on the basis of the work we undertake. Most of us understand the concept of hourly pay, so would expect to be paid more if we worked more hours. There's something about being paid the same as someone who did a tiny proportion of the work you did that just doesn't quite seem fair.

And of course Jesus knows that this is how we will respond. He knows that we will feel that sense of unfairness. And he uses the story to teach us something of exceptional importance. That generosity should be in our nature. Of course the landowner could have got away with paying those workers he hired later far less money. But he chose not to. He chose to be generous. And in doing so he didn't deprive those who had worked for the whole day of anything they were entitled to. None of them went home hungry. It's a kind of generosity we need to embrace.

And yet I wonder if there isn't just a little more to the story than that. I wonder what purpose the landowner had, and more importantly I wonder what Jesus's purpose was in telling the story.

You see if the landowner simply wanted to be generous, his manager could have called the labourers up in the opposite order, so that those who had worked for the longest had no idea that they were being paid the same as those who worked less time. There is no doubt about the landowner's generosity, but it is quite likely that his actions would have sown discontent among the workforce. So any message about our innate equality before God would be lost in the squabbling created by being paid the same as someone who worked far fewer hours than you did.

And if we look at the bigger picture, the truth is that all of those labourers would have been back in the market-place the next morning. The landowner had indeed been generous towards those who had arrived later, but the status quo doesn't change. The landowner continues to require a workforce, and the labourers continue to be dependent on being hired to earn a daily wage, and those who are not hired continue to be dependent on generosity for survival.

And I wonder whether this might start to help us to understand some of Jesus's purpose in telling this parable. Because it isn't as simple as it might seem, and it can shed light on our own situation just as much as it will have shed light on the situation of his first listeners.

A contextual point will help us here, too. I have explained before that the gospel writers were careful about where they placed the stories in their gospels. This parable appears only in Matthew's gospel. It comes after the story of the rich young man, where Jesus says that it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than a rich man to enter the kingdom of God, after which Peter says that he and the other disciples have given up all that they have.

You see Jesus knows us. He knows what we're like. For good and for not so good. Both are so very important. He knows that we can be generous. He's seen it, after all. Peter is telling the truth when he says that he and the other disciples gave up everything. And he knows that we can still have the tendency to plead that "it's not fair". To see things from our own perspective, rather than looking more widely.

One of the few positives to come out of this year's Covid 19 pandemic has been our re-evaluation of the value of various jobs. This year we have had to recognise that our key workers are actually some of the lowest paid. It should be salutary to us all. And it should inspire us to work towards a genuinely fairer situation. And that is before we look at our global responsibilities. Our willingness to enjoy the benefits of cheap produce even when it comes at the expense of those who produce it across the world.

These are not situations that we can solve overnight. But neither are they things we can ignore. That's why Jesus told parables. Because there are always things to think about. There are always values that are worth applying to the world in which we live. There is always a call to continue to be generous and to see fairness from every angle. And then, with God's strength, we will begin to see the world transformed.

Amen