

Matthew 20:1-16 – Sermon for 10am

It is my first sermon at St John's, and I don't know many of you very well yet. I look forward to this changing, but in the meantime, just between you and God, I wonder where you are with your faith? Are you working really hard in the heat of life, feeling like you are carrying the rest of the world? Are you coasting along feeling like you are floating but not really going anywhere? Perhaps you are happy that you have God nicely, neatly fitted into your Sunday box? Or maybe you are somewhere else with your faith entirely...

The parable of the laborers in the vineyard is one of the most intriguing of all the ones that Jesus told; and also one which gets us most emotionally involved. Almost everyone feels for the workers who appear to be treated unfairly, doing all the work but only being paid the same as everyone else. Surely there should be some pro rata system in place? The Landowner's accounting system is unfair!

However, this word picture of what the Kingdom of Heaven is like, is intended to draw us into it; to look at what it means to be each of the characters represented – and that's what we are going to do now. For a first sermon at a new place, it seems like a bit of a toughy, but I believe it has an awful lot that is good for us to remind ourselves as we, together, start a new chapter in the life of St. John's.

Just as a scene setting, this story comes on the back of an episode in Jesus' life where he meets a rich man who struggles with whether his money should come before his devotion to God or not, and then an episode where Jesus deals with rewards for people who sacrificially give up things to follow him. There will be rewards, Jesus says, but in the verse before our story starts, the reward might not be exactly how we would naturally plan it. Jesus uses this story of the vineyard workers to illustrate his point. So what does each character begin to tell us?

So, the first character is the Landowner. Our first instinct is to equate the Landowner in the story with God, and whilst that's probably correct, please also in your imagination try to enter into the story too. There's three things I want us to note about this landowner. The first is that he is completely sovereign in his decisions. It's his money that he is using to hire workers and he can do what he likes with it! Since you all have your bibles open, you can look at verse 15 – “Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me?” And this includes being generous beyond what we would expect. The Landowner makes his own mind up, despite protests and grumbles. He does what is right by those who have worked all day and what is generous beyond any expectation to the others.

The second thing about the landowner is that he keeps coming back to invite more people into his vineyard. His harvest must be collected in and he is desperate not to miss any grapes so he invites and invites as many people as possible to come to work with him. It's not a one-time offer, but the landowner is someone who keeps asking and seeking out people to come to him.

The third thing is the weird order in which he pays his workers. In v8 he pays those who worked least first, and lets the ones who have been there all day wait. Strange and unfair you'd be right in thinking perhaps. A deliberate slap in the face for those who were in the market early in the morning.

Of course, at this point, like many people, I'm with the workers! We've worked all day and received the same as the layabouts who didn't bother to work until 5pm in the afternoon! And now, the landowner rubs it in our faces by making us watch as he pays them the same! V4 says that the landowner's promise was to pay what was right, but that's nonsense for us! Just a historical note,

this is a subsistence economy so a day's pay was a day's living for the household, and so it could be argued that the landowner did the right thing in supporting all the households for the day – giving them all their daily bread – but that still doesn't make those who were up at the crack of dawn feel any better I'm sure!

So there's the landowner and the workers, but also those in the market place. Have you ever wondered what that might have been like? Some, desperate to work to feed their family, and other perhaps, drifting, playing games, chatting the day away, not really fancying the work...

It's an odd story that Jesus tells, and as it is intended as a picture of God's kingdom, now and in the future, it can be a little disconcerting since it seems so unfair. While thinking about it I've come to really like the image, and I'll tell you why.

God's Kingdom is ruled by a God who keeps coming to invite people into his vineyard. It's not a one-time-only offer and just because I didn't sign up the first time, I don't get shunned for the next time. No matter who we are and where our lives have come and gone previously, we all are still invited into God's Kingdom. And thankfully, God is sovereign in his kingdom. He isn't swayed by my miserly judgments of how much other people are worth or how much reward each person should get pro rata by my estimation of their faithful sacrifice and generosity! God gives to each what is right in verse 4.

This means that in God's kingdom, there is no relativism and comparison. We don't have to spend our whole lives looking sideways at each other, wondering why we seem to always be the ones who have to work so hard. The secret is that none of us have worked the full day in Jesus' story. We all signed up late in life, whether we were young or old, whether it was 11am or 3pm in the day of our lives, none of us deserve a full reward. And even then, who of us can claim to have been God's perfect worker? I certainly can't. But the Kingdom of heaven doesn't run that way. It's a gracious generosity from God rather than a stingy accounting from me. No-one gets what they deserve and that's a really good thing!

But this means for us as church, we can neither live comparing ourselves, or heaven forbid, believe we are better than those outside. Instead, we have the privilege, like the early workers, of seeing how the Landowner seems to want to bless those workers who have been there longest with the happy scene of seeing his generosity before receiving their own pay. It's not a slap in the face; it's a chance to see God at work in an amazing way. When a new person enters God's kingdom, we see afresh his grace at work in being generous to another undeserving person like us.

As a church, as Jesus' body itself in the world, we get the chance to play the part of the workers in seeing God's generosity, but also of the landowner himself. We are Jesus's hands on earth, and so we get to partner with God in inviting people to come out of the marketplace and into God's vineyard, his Kingdom. And just as God invites and invites and invites, we can keep inviting people to meet God, to follow Jesus and to come to his kingdom where we all receive way more than we can hope for.

Which brings us to the people in the marketplace. There are people in the marketplace who are desperate to come into the Landowner's vineyard. There are people in our society, in our village, who are desperate to come into God's Kingdom. They simply don't know the way and are waiting for an invitation. As Jesus' body, as members of his Kingdom, it isn't just our job to invite them, but it is our moral obligation to help these people who are desperately looking for something other than a seat in the marketplace of culture to find their home in God's kingdom. If we don't invite people, how will they find their way?

There may be others in the marketplace too though who don't want to come into the landowner's vineyard for whatever reason. Maybe they've heard things which have put them off, or met some of the workers who weren't very gracious, or maybe they just don't feel the need to work today. This is no different today with God's kingdom. Our village will be full of people who have bad experiences of church, or for whom being part of God's kingdom is just not something they need today. Maybe they don't like the landowner for some reason, maybe because of things they see on the news or things they have read.

Those people in the story who were left in the marketplace all day drifted through their whole day, unfulfilled and without direction and meaning until they finally accepted the invitation. How sad would it be if our neighbours and our friends just drifted their lives away and never got the chance to see what it was like in God's Kingdom, and to experience his generosity and grace. Surely our love for those we care about is enough to offer them the chance to come with us into the kingdom of heaven where life is no longer a meaningless rat-race, a black hole of waiting for it to all end, or simply a chase after pleasure which will leave us with nothing ultimately. Working in God's vineyard is rewarding, fulfilling, meaningful and secure. What a contrast to daily life in the marketplace!

If you are a worker, then be blessed, you are receiving God's gracious reward in an undeserved way. You can be his hands as he leads others into his kingdom too and you can witness the joy that this brings to you but also to your heavenly Lord.

If you are still in the marketplace this morning, then please, please accept the invitation to become a follower of Jesus. Perhaps you feel the drifting of life and just want to find meaning. Perhaps you feel the hopelessness of an ending one day bringing all you've ever worked for and valued crashing down around you; then please come to meet Jesus who brings eternal significance to all of it. Perhaps you've been put off by your experience of Christians and Churches; if so, please accept the invitation to meet God through Jesus and then judge your experience of a generous God who gives beyond what any of us deserve and who isn't miserly and has the grace to keep inviting rather than shutting people off from him.

It is a privilege to be at St. John's for such an exciting time as now, where we can be co-workers in God's harvest and where we can welcome and celebrate all who come to follow Jesus. Amen.