

Matthew 20:1-16 – Sermon

The very first sermon I ever preached here, back in 2017 was on this Gospel reading from Matthew. How many of you remember what I said? I read over a copy of it while preparing for today and you'll be glad to know, this morning's will be shorter!

Since it is Harvest, it is really apt that we are looking at a parable about a grape harvest as a word picture for the Kingdom of Heaven – what it looks like when God comes to rule. It follows on from Jesus teaching about 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 imagine it. This parable illustrates this.

Let's think about the Landowner. The first thing we notice 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 – '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 he does what is generous beyond any expectation to the others.

Secondly, the Landowner 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 and invites as many people as possible to come to work with him. It's not a one-time offer, he keeps asking and seeking out people to come to him.

Thirdly, the Landowner pays his workers in a weird order, paying those who worked least first, and letting the ones who have been there all day wait. It feels a bit like a slap in the face for those who were working all day. So much about the Landowner's behaviour is confusing.

Then there's the workers and those waiting in the marketplace. 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 a rich and multi-faceted story: disturbing in places and inspiring in others. I quite like it!

I like that God's Kingdom is ruled by a Landowner 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. 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'd by my estimation of their faithful sacrifice and generosity!

I like that in God's kingdom, therefore, 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 gracious generosity from God rather than a stingy accounting from me. No-one gets what they deserve and that's a really good thing!

I like that this also means that as a church we neither live comparing ourselves, nor believing 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 actually 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.

This 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 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 is our moral obligation to help them, invite them and welcome them, making space for them. 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. 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 feel 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. 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 as much of a privilege to be at St. John's now as it was in 2017 when I preached on this passage for the first time. We live in exciting times as a church. We have the opportunity to be co-workers in God's harvest, welcoming and celebrating all who come to follow Jesus. We have the possibility of helping invite others to find their place within God's vineyard, and discerning our own role within this gracious operation of faith that God is offering. May we never find this a dull undertaking. May we always find our hearts quickening at the thought of serving our Creator, the sovereign and gracious King who calls us time and again and rewards all beyond all deserving. Amen.