

2023-09-24 ... 10am Worship Sermon ... Revd Jane Stephenson

Exodus 16: 2 – 15; Philippians 1: 21 – end; Matthew 20: 1 – 16

I was talking to an older lady one day, a few years ago and she was telling me a bit about her childhood. She was the oldest of 8 children and as you can imagine, she was often in charge of her younger siblings, especially when there was a new baby in the house. She'd have liked to stay at school, but very sadly, when she was 12 her mother was taken into hospital, from which she never emerged. Her Dad, a local blacksmith, did his best, but it was necessary for her to leave school and look after the household.

This went on for a while and then one very dark night, coming back from a job, her father came off his bike and broke his leg very badly. He was confined to bed for several months, not able to work ... things were very tough ... and she worried, not about the task of running the house, but most particularly about how she could feed the children. Her eldest brother did his best to keep Dad's garden going, but it was winter and they were short of food ... but by some miracle, or so it seemed, a pie, a loaf of bread, a sack of potatoes ... food appeared by their back door ... it was a small village, not a rich one, but every day some food arrived. "Our neighbours" she said "were about as poor as us, but gave us whatever they could and did it in turns, so our children would not go hungry, and our Dad would recover."

"That," she said "was when I first understood what the grace of God really meant." Her neighbours were mostly church and chapel people, not high theologians, but solid believers in the word of God, and they took Christ's commandment to love your neighbour very seriously indeed. From the little they each had, they would put together enough to support those who were in dire need – hoping and believing that if circumstances were reversed, the same grace would be shown to them. They probably wouldn't have articulated it like that, they probably used the word 'duty' rather than love, but they lived their lives looking out for each other and by their own actions delivering God's grace to those around them.

This story and indeed the view of our human duty might seem a little removed from today's Gospel reading, at least it is at first sight, but the passage we have today is a parable that Jesus tells to emphasise to his listeners the gift of God's grace which cannot be restricted, owned, or even earned by our own sense of what we desire or of how the world should be controlled – whatever laws and rules we make, they will not define God's relationship to his people.

Now, in terms of our commercially driven world, the treatment of the workers in the vineyard does seem very unfair. Those hired first worked for 12 hours in the heat and sun of the day; those coming later obviously worked fewer hours ... the last group (11th hour) until 5pm'ish very few hours ... if you did a full day wouldn't you be cross if they received the same for those short periods of work, as you did for 12 hours ...?

Anyone hearing that story from Jesus would be indignant ... and of course he tells the story to get that reaction ... a story we won't forget ... we probably share some of the indignation ... but it's not a story to demand a change in labour laws, or employment contracts or even wages ... it's a story that should actually bring us hope ... and it's not unlike the parable of the Prodigal Son where the older brother who stays faithfully at home (perhaps even labouring all day every day in the sun) sees his brother rewarded by his father after some frankly very bad behaviour ... the hope there – the hope in this parable lies in us being able to step away from our own restricted view of the world into the abundantly overflowing generosity of our Creator God, who shows us it's never too late for us to come to Him.

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The Landowner pays those who began work first the wage he had promised them ... he does not cheat them, he does not replace them with cheaper labour ... God gives to those who have known Him longest, His loving grace ... and those who in Christ have benefitted from the joy of that relationship ... enjoyed it ... but for those who have stood around, unwanted, unemployed in the market place for much longer, the same is given out of generosity and love ... and the delight of God that even at the 11th hour they can still come to him.

And so there is always HOPE. Jesus preaches that hope, but we need to find our way to the vineyard when we are invited ... find our way to God's Kingdom through Christ's invitation. It is not by our own work, or own good deeds that we are offered the grace of God's Kingdom, but simply by knowing and trusting in that grace. Secure in our faith we should receive God's bounty with gratitude, not resenting those who come later, who have lived less faithful lives, but rejoicing in the never-ending grace we can all share.

And it's by giving thanks to God for his grace, allowing it to guide the lives we try to live, that will ensure the continued growth of His labourers and of His harvest ... not just by the piety of prayers but by the feeding of our neighbours. The generosity of those experienced by that lady is the example to us all of how God's grace flows through the world ... from this life and into the next ... **it challenges and changes us all.**

Amen.