

Baptism of Rudi Eddie Fort

St. Brandon's

Jonah 3:10-4:11; Matthew 20: 1-16

24th September 2017

I want to try to relate the two readings which we've just heard to Rudi's baptism. But to do that, we first need to understand more about the readings themselves, and particularly the Gospel reading which is where I'll mainly focus.

Jesus often spoke in parables – stories which have a meaning in them, which give us pictures to work with, but which we have to work out for ourselves. And that means that there might be more than one interpretation, and any interpretation might not quite 'work' fully. So here is an interpretation of what Jesus was trying to get across in the parable of the vineyard.

Jesus first talks about the kingdom of heaven, and by that He doesn't just mean heaven itself but wherever God's reign is taken seriously – on earth as in heaven, as we say in the Lord's prayer. And He suggests the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner (God) who has a vineyard (perhaps part of the world rather than in heaven), and who invites people to work in it. And before we think more about the idea of invitations, it is just worth noting that a picture of a vineyard invites us to think of what's grown there – grapes – and what at least one of the products from them might be – wine. So the invitation to the workers is to help to produce wine. And that might trigger in our minds a link to the wedding in Cana of Galilee where Jesus turned water into ridiculous quantities of very, very good wine – what a party that would have turned into! And it also links to something in the Old Testament where God is pictured as hosting a fabulous banquet, "a feast of rich food, a feast of well-matured wines" (Isaiah 25: 6). So Jesus is building on those pictures of glorious abundance, of the generosity of God, of a feast, a party, with wine overflowing.

And He's saying that the landowner (God) invites people to work in the vineyard. Now you notice that there are absolutely no qualifications required – the invitation is to anyone and, apparently, everyone who comes to the market-place and is willing to work, willing to accept the invitation. It's also worth noting that the landowner (God) has a manager – he appears towards the end to pay the wages. But the landowner doesn't send the manager to hire the workers, as we might expect, but comes himself.

So one way of interpreting this parable is that if the vineyard is the kingdom of heaven, it is God Himself who is continually going out and inviting more and more people in. And it doesn't matter what time of your life it might be – whether you're young and in the early morning of your life, in the middle at the noontime of your life, or into the evening of your life, the invitation is the same. And although it's portrayed here as an invitation to work, it's usual to interpret this as an invitation to eternal life, a life with God which begins now but carries on for all eternity.

And we get that idea because the reward is the same whatever time the labourers responded, however much work they had done. Now this is crazy economics! You can't run a business like that. But that's exactly the point – it's not a business, and if God chooses to run it this way then who are we to say otherwise. Well, of course, there were those who said otherwise – those who had worked all day weren't happy because they thought they'd get paid more, and they moaned about it. But as the vineyard owner says to them, he's not being unjust because they're getting the normal day's pay, and that was what was agreed with them. What they can't 'get' is that God adds an enormous dollop of generosity to His justice for all those who haven't worked all day.

And, of course, Jonah from our other reading is a bit like those who moan in the Gospel reading. He wants a God of justice who will punish people when they're wrong, and he's cross, for no particular reason, that God is "gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love". The people of Nineveh don't

deserve God's generous grace and mercy. Nor do the workers in the vineyard who didn't do a full day's work. But they get it just the same.

Now, do you see what's happening here? We're perhaps having our idea of God turned upside down. He's a God of love, of steadfast love, whose love never changes, a God who is continually inviting people to join Him in His vineyard. A God who rewards them in exactly the same way whatever time it is in their life that they respond, a just God but also a generous God. And the reward is eternal life, which is an invitation to a banquet, a wedding feast, a party where the wine will be exceptionally good and flow for ever!

Now how does all that relate to Rudi as he is baptised this morning? Well baptism is effectively a response to the invitation of God to join Him in the vineyard, to work with Him and to have eternal life which begins now as a reward. But, of course, Rudi is too young to accept that invitation for himself. Which is why Rudi's parents Michael and Michelle, together with the godparents, will make the promises which are effectively a positive response to the invitation of God to Rudi. And of course those responses made on behalf of Rudi are responses which say to him, "We'll help you to understand this loving, generous God, so that in time we hope and pray that you will want to accept the invitation that God is making today, and will continue to make throughout your life, for yourself." And the point at which we hope Rudi will own all this for himself, is what's called confirmation, of course.

So that's what's happening to and on behalf of Rudi today. But, of course, there's something here for all of us. Whatever time it is in your life, our loving and generous God is still issuing that very same invitation to you. Come into the vineyard, help me make wine that will be ready for the banquet and the wedding feast that is to come. You don't deserve it, but neither do any of us. You're never too late, and the reward of eternal life is the same for everyone. That's the invitation. We only have to say yes.

Amen