

St Brandon's, Sermon for 20th September 2020.

Philippians 1:21–end, Matthew 20:1-16

Last or First?

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Today we hear another of those stories – parables – of Jesus that are very engaging and easy to follow, quite enjoyable pictures: then comes the sting in the tail, and we are left open-mouthed.

This is a wonderfully crafted story, we can just picture the mechanics of the scene: the market place clamour, the hot fields they labour in: see those glistening backs and smell that sweat! Its cleverly told: the payment is starting with the last to be hired – those hired at the eleventh hour, as the King James version puts it. And those last hired labourers are paid the usual daily wage, and we think “Ah, that’s nice!”, perhaps even raise an eyebrow in surprise. Expectations and anticipation ramps: what inflated riches then are to be paid to the ones who worked hardest? What?? Only the same? Merely the same as the slackers? We are indignant, I suspect, and a bit baffled.

Jesus has a way of telling stories that make us catch ourselves being wrong-footed, being human where human is falling short of who we are meant to be, if we truly step up and attempt to live as if we really are God’s children, made in his image.

Let’s go back into that market place in our imaginations and look more carefully.

The landowner agrees the usual daily wage with labourers who are out early: these sound like the regular lot, standing up and standing out, keen, fit and strong; they do this every day and get out in the vineyard first. We aspire to be in that number!

Others turn up after wanting or needing to put other things first, now standing idly around because they’ve missed the main hiring time: perhaps that’s me, all too often – but the landowner kindly overlooks the poor start and takes me on.

Right at the end of the day, at 5pm, or the eleventh hour, the landowner returns again to the market place, and finds others standing around and asks them, “Why are you standing here idle all day?” They don’t offer excuses, or get defensive, they just say it as it is: “Because no one has hired us.” The undesirable, un-hirable. I wonder what they look like? Maybe some have deformities, or other physical disadvantage, or are mentally incapacitated, or have not recovered strength after injury or illness. Perhaps they won’t stand much chance of getting stronger if they are always over-looked in the market place. Perhaps they are destined to stay impoverished, under-nourished, unable to provide effectively for themselves, never mind their dependants.

Today is their lucky day! They are going to be allowed into the workplace. And at the end of the day, at paytime, instead of being at the back, the owner says to the manager to pay them first: not to keep them waiting, and to pay them in full! as if they had contributed at full-strength. He gives them priority and dignity in front of all the others.

And, in turn, the others, too, are paid in full, despite shortcomings.

Oh Boy! What are the really good guys going to get? Surely the real pat on the back; the golden handshake. No, the fair wage for the job, the agreed fair wage, nothing less and nothing more.

God really challenges us to put down our expectations of our own worth and attend to those who we are liable to put ourselves ahead of. To see here, the landowner modelling God’s compassion and provision, particularly seeking out and protecting the vulnerable; loving the unloved; lifting the lowly; showing justice and mercy.

We can be so quick to compare ourselves to others and come up with the wrong conclusions: the landowner is not unfair to anyone, he simply chooses to view others with generosity. Like the elder brother in the story of the return of the prodigal, we see love bestowed on another and feel instantly

left out and jealous, as if the love shown to another was taken away from us, belonged rightly to us, is finite in quantity. The generous landowner has enough for everyone, and it shares it even-handedly, pointedly including the usually excluded, giving dignity to the demeaned.

This is very much the stance Jesus takes with the marginalised and poor, and we are to think twice about how we measure up, but it's not the whole purpose of the story – its perhaps not even the central reason for telling this parable.

Immediately before this parable comes the story of the rich, young man who asks what he must do to inherit eternal life, Jesus responds: 'keep the commandments', to which he retorts, "I have kept all these; what do I still lack?", the answer, if you've forgotten, is to give up his many possessions. Because, Jesus goes on to say, it's easier for a camel to get through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. When Peter pipes up to observe that they, the disciples have left everything and followed him – so what will they get? Jesus refers to thrones, and receiving back a hundredfold.

However, he then tells this parable of the labourers, to warn us against a sense of entitlement: I have kept all these commandments, so will I be ensured a place in heaven? Or, with the expectation that, as you are one of life's winners, so too will you be one of God's favourites – will you??

It's easy to think we don't think like that, when I put it as crudely as that, but in subtle ways, we do! Just like the workers who turn up early, expecting, and getting chosen, we associate the successes in this life to give us a preferment in the queue to get through the gates of heaven. We are wired to expect reward to follow endeavour. How hard it is to put down those expectations. Not to inwardly boast or presume we are anything. This parable serves as an illustration of the judgement day when we may be wrong-footed in our expectations of who is first and ahead of us. "The last will be first, and the first will be last", says Jesus. It is, simply, a reminder that the reward that Jesus promises – that hundredfold, those thrones – that promise should not become ground on which to stand. We have a God who is overwhelmingly generous, abundant, graciously providing; how hard it is to be content to put ourselves amongst those that are at the back, holding the hope, and trusting that he sees us.

This stance isn't just about what happens at the end time and never mind the now, because the kingdom of God is seeded in us now. What happens at the end time starts now, today, in how we view that bit that is God in us, that thing we call faith, that is a gift, not an earned quality. Those secret presumptions that we are pious, our position in church and in community is secured: when we boast inwardly of being one of the desirable, hireable labourers we begin to expect God's favour. No, God's favour is undeserved love and grace; it is the reward he chooses out of his generosity, even if we do come in last, with empty hands and broken hearts. It's God's measurements, not ours, measuring with grace and love, and thank God it is, and that he will save despite what I have done, not because of what I have achieved, for only he can tell who he has in mind when he says, the first will be last and the last will be first!

Amen