

God's Love for All Humanity

I'm not sure if you have ever participated or voted to strike as part of your working life? When I was less than a year old my father pushed me in my pram as he went on strike at the school where he worked. He was the trade union rep and so me and the pram were at the front of the march and the picket. I only found about this a few years ago as I was balloted for strike action myself whilst working in a large school where the Governors and Senior managers wanted to change the teachers' pension scheme which would disadvantage those receiving it and individuals would become responsible for payments into it rather than the school who could no longer afford it, striking became a bargaining chip and part of the negotiation process. A divide was formed between teachers and management and the Governors and there was little attention paid to how this made staff feel and what it said about their value, rather it was a wholly economic and financial decision. It was one of the saddest times in the history of the school and many people left. This was the first time in the school's history that staff were balloted for strike action. I was challenged ethically as a person, teacher and priest as I filled in the ballot box and on many levels including a spiritual and Christian one as factions began to form and there was little room for these values to come to the surface despite its Anglican Foundation.

I had only once before been caught up in strike action before in my working life when I worked for the Prison Service and POA members illegally went on strike in the open prison where I worked and I ended up making sandwiches and delivering them to prisoners in their billets at lunchtime. Civilian staff carried the prison that day and made it safe enough for it to operate. This gave me an insight into the role of prison officers and for me it emphasised that we were all called together to serve at Her Majesty's pleasure in different ways and no one was greater or less than anyone else. As a secular organisation there was more cooperation and understanding displayed towards those who were striking nationally and appreciation towards those who were left on duty that day from the strikers. This legacy

showed a united front amongst uniformed and civilian staff where there was mutual respect on both sides.

From a young age throughout my life, I have had a particularly strong justice and fairness ethic running through my veins which is deeply rooted belief in the sacred nature of humanity from first biblical principles that we are all made in the image and likeness of God. That this is manifested in the creation story and is lived out by the Israelites who were always challenged to follow God's ways rather than their own despite the threat of persecution. and most noticeably revealed to us in the incarnation and through the way in which Jesus lived his life and told parables which are stories with a hidden meaning.

Today's parable in our gospel reading is a particularly challenging one. for me it illustrates the principles that and beliefs that I have alluded to earlier about the sacred nature of humanity and equality in God's eyes.

Firstly, I'll give this parable some background and context. Chapters 19 and 20 of Matthew's Gospel recount the 80-mile journey between Galilee and Jerusalem. Here we encounter Jesus the teacher more often than Jesus the miracle worker. Today's parable of the vineyard labourers is unique to Matthew and comes immediately after the story of the rich young man. The disciples, who have left everything to follow Jesus, are disconcerted and he is comforting them. Parables like this can be described as stories drawn from everyday life with an unexpected twist, thus leaving some ambiguity in our minds to stimulate reflection. So, there are many gaps in the story here which are left to our imagination. Why were so many extra workers needed? Why had the workers hired last not been chosen earlier? And so on. A master of a house hires labourers for his vineyard.

As a result of the reorganisation of Palestine by the Roman General Pompey the Great (63 BC), large sections of the population had been dispossessed of their land. Herod the Great also expropriated large areas, giving the land to officials in his court. Many farm labourers, small tenants and artisans therefore had to look for work daily from the town square or marketplace (the agora). The grape industry was the most common source of employment.

I will now open up the parable for further examination and draw out how it illustrates the point about the sacred nature of humanity made equally in God's eyes. For Matthew's Jewish readers, the vineyard is also an important symbol of the People of God in need (see Isaiah 5; Jeremiah 12: 10; Psalm 80). Early in the morning and the eleventh hour. At the time of Jesus, the hours were counted from dawn. So early in the morning would be the first hour, about 6.00; the third hour about 9.00; the eleventh hour, 17.00. One denarius a day, a fair wage This sum was enough to keep a family for a day or two. By law, hired workers had to be paid every evening so that they could provide for their families. Jews were familiar with this, since the rules for paying labourers figured in the Book of Deuteronomy (24: 14–15). 'Do you begrudge my generosity?' Matthew writes at a critical time for the first-century church but for me this parable has just a valuable message for us in the c.21st century is too a critical time for the Church as it seeks to move forward to make reparation for human slavery, enters into the public square and voices its fears over immigration, economic policy and child poverty.

Getting back to the parable, communities were composed of original Jewish converts, present from the 'first hour', while newer Gentile converts who had joined the communities at the 'eleventh hour' were still given the same treatment and recognition. There was general discontent and grumbling. There was a divide about this not dissimilar about who can receive benefits and are welcome to live and work in the UK.

Whatever we may personally believe politically or from an ecclesiological point of view about these issues this parable helps us understand that in God's eyes, those who turned to God later in life are worth just as much as those who have followed him from the beginning.

The parable and Jesus' message is clear shows that all are equal in God's eyes, and that the gift of his grace is not the result of strict 'accountancy', but of God's love for all. My prayer and the grace I ask for this week from sharing the gospel with you that we may be Conscious that God's generous love for us cannot be 'earned'. Amen