

THE WORKERS IN THE VINEYARD

The Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard Matthew 20: 1-16

"For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard. He agreed to pay them a denarius for the day and sent them into his vineyard.

"About nine in the morning he went out and saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing. He told them, 'You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.' So they went.

"He went out again about noon and about three in the afternoon and did the same thing. About five in the afternoon he went out and found still others standing around. He asked them, 'Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?'

"'Because no one has hired us,' they answered.

"He said to them, 'You also go and work in my vineyard.'

"When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, 'Call the workers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and going on to the first.'

"The workers who were hired about five in the afternoon came and each received a denarius. So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius. When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner. 'These who were hired last worked only one hour,' they said, 'and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day.'

"But he answered one of them, 'I am not being unfair to you, friend. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius? Take your pay and go. I want to give the one who was hired last the same as I gave you. Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?'

"So the last will be first, and the first will be last."



***THE WORKERS IN THE VINEYARD BY HANS SCHAUFELIN
(1517)***

In the final words of this story Jesus surprises us with this memorable sentence - 'so the last will be first and the first will be last.' These words stay with us. Many of us would wish to cry out, 'but this isn't fair.' Jesus seems to have built into the story an injustice. Why should those who worked longest not be paid more than those who only worked for an hour? Jesus wished to embed his message of God's generous grace more deeply in the lives of those who hear it. He challenges the listener to put themselves in the shoes of each of the characters and to see life from their point of view, moving them towards empathy and to a way of seeing that will help them challenge the status quo. Jesus weaves together each character's perspective, with the expectations of the crowd and, by confounding those expectations, moves the listener on to a

place where a new understanding of God's realm of grace becomes possible.

If I were to imagine myself as one of those chosen at the beginning of the day to work in the fields, I might feel proud that I've been chosen when others have not – perhaps I might notice that I'm privileged because I'm fit and healthy and known to be a good worker. Or I might just be relieved that I will receive a day's wages, which is just enough for myself and my family to live on. I can imagine that I would be furious to know that others have received the same as me, when I have been out in the vineyard during the heat of the day, working hard for my wages.

If you were to imagine yourself as one of those chosen at the end of the day, you may see things differently. For anyone who was not terribly good at or enthusiastic about sport at school when you remember PE lessons, standing with your back to the wall, waiting for someone to pick you for their team. Perhaps you were always chosen last and this may give you an insight into the experience of the workers chosen last? You imagine that you have spent most of the day feeling rejected, unworthy of being offered work, you might wonder what it is about yourself that means you don't get the job – were you not strong enough, do you have a reputation that means employers will not take me on? Perhaps you are disabled, or a widow, a refugee; perhaps in the eyes of those with jobs to give out, you are perceived to be the wrong colour, the wrong gender, the wrong sexuality. You would be relieved to be taken on, even for an hour or two, but you also know that you will not have earned enough to live on or to feed your family. Fear and self-loathing might mix with your relief, possibly even despair.

What a surprise when all are paid the same by the generous landowner! It's a bumper crop this year and he or she is grateful that they have found enough pickers to bring the harvest home. So the owner asks when challenged, what business is it of anyone else if she chooses to be generous with her wealth?

If we allow our imaginations to respond to the story, we are able to relate to the characters and enter into their experience. But as with all good story tellers, Jesus leaves us with more to think about,

with questions to ask. Jesus tells the story to demonstrate what the kingdom of God is like – it is not the same as the human realm, so often marked by greed and a survival of the fittest approach to life, commerce and the structures of our society. Jesus wants the listeners to understand that what God longs for is that all are able to live a full life, in which all have what they need and understand they are part of a generous realm. So we move beyond empathy to ask questions about the barriers that prevent all people from thriving and, if we identify with Jesus and the stories he told, we become more generous and move to take action for the world we live in to be more just.

Often the landowner in the parable is identified as God and God's generosity to all is a reflection of God's love and grace to all people. If the daily wage was just enough to live on, then to give anyone less than the daily wage is to condemn them to death. Everything I have learnt of God, through scripture, through the teaching of the church and through my own experience of faith tells me that God condemns no one to death. God longs for all to have life and have life in its fullness. It matters not a jot how hard I work, I cannot earn my salvation, I'm saved not because of my actions but because of God's action of love. As a Christian, that is made clear to me in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Sacrificial love and generous grace are the threads with which God weaves together the story of salvation from the moment of creation until the time when all things will be restored.

*This sermon was taken from a Radio 4 Sunday Worship programme entitled "Woven." I believe the sermon was written and preached by **The Revd Michaela Youngson.***