

**St Mary & St Michael, Trumpington**

**Sunday 20th September**

**Third Sunday Service**

***Reflection on Matthew 20:1–16***

Today's reading is another of Jesus's parables. We know that, as the ogre Shrek might say: parables are stories with layers. They're stories of everyday events, with deeper meanings and often given a twist. They make their points using humour and contrast to make us think.

Jesus excelled at creating pointed stories. Sometimes, he used ridiculous exaggeration, as when he talks about taking a plank out of our eye so that we can see clearly enough to take a speck from someone else's eye. Or when he talks of it being easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the Kingdom of God.

But parables are also provocative. They make us think, and re-think, and challenge our assumptions. They reveal hidden truths about God and the world and the way God wants us to be. Sometimes, we try to wriggle out of Jesus's sayings – looking only at the safely spiritual meanings, and ignoring the hard practical ones.

Parables have layers, and they are true on all of those layers. The surface might be ridiculous, but it's ridiculously *true*. And the parable only works if there's continuous truth and meaning from the surface into the depths.

And this parable is an outlier, even by Jesus's standards. Here, Jesus is totally outrageous, to the extent that it can be hard for us in our Western, 21st-Century context even to see how outrageous he's being. Because this parable is huge. It's outrageous and offensive and challenging, and, above all, it's centred on Jesus' message about the Kingdom of God and what it means for the way we live our lives.

Here, Jesus up-ends all our sense of natural justice. He destroys economics and rewrites the world of work, because he ruptures the connection between work and reward. So, if we find the parable offensive, as I do, we need to listen especially carefully to what Jesus says and not try to rationalise it away.

First of all, then, on the surface, this parable is clearly about work, payment and fairness. It describes a very familiar situation – of workers, an employer, a recruitment process, and the paying of a daily wage.

But Jesus breaks down our expectations. In the Kingdom of God, he says, everyone receives a fair daily wage. *Everyone*. Everyone who stands in the marketplace asking for work will be given work, and everyone will receive

enough money to live on from the landlord, the employer, the system – regardless of how much work they can actually do or what that work is.

This message is behind the pattern of the church's life in the Acts of the Apostles. All those who follow Jesus share equally. Those who have much money give it freely to those who don't have enough. Food and shelter are available to everyone. This is the Kingdom of God in action, alive!

This idea hits home particularly strongly for me right now. We live in a country in which many people have lost their jobs or fear they soon will, through no fault of their own but because of an unfolding economic disaster. Families are going hungry. Heating bills and even rents can't be paid, with winter approaching. The mere existence of the Cambridge Food Bank should be a scandal, let alone how busy it is.

Are we happy that our leaders seem happy to ignore the needs of the poor and the oppressed? That politicians seem to think £150k a year plus a free flat isn't enough for them to live on, while refusing to pay care workers a living wage?

Or, like the workers in the parable who were hired early in the day, do we feel the unfairness of paying everyone the same, no matter how much work they have done? I work hard, I studied hard at school, I deserve my success. Surely! ?

But Jesus recognises privilege when he sees it, and he's not impressed. No-one is more important, more valued, than anyone else in the Kingdom of God. The workers are paid because of the generosity of the landlord, not because of the economic value that they have generated.

You can't even call Jesus a Communist – even Karl Marx wasn't this radical about the redistribution of wealth!

God's Kingdom is somewhere that the human laws of economics are completely disrupted – intentionally and deliberately.

But parables have layers, so we can't stop here. We need to look deeper.

First, this parable asks what we mean by 'work'. The landowner gives all the workers the same pay, whether they've laboured for the whole day or just part of it. Whether they carried heavy baskets of fruit, sorted the grapes or operated the winepress.

So, why *do* we reward different kinds of work very differently? An obvious example at the moment is whether it's right to pay a hospital cleaner, a

nurse or a childcare worker less than a tenth of what we pay a lawyer who helps large companies get away with destroying the environment, or an executive who generates huge profits from life-saving but over-priced drugs. Is this how the Kingdom works?

Jesus says that the Kingdom is like the generous landowner, which means that it gives equal rewards to *all* who come to work for it.

In addition, the Kingdom will find useful work for everyone. That work might be showy, like being a preacher or a vicar, or it might be hidden, like being a cleaner or children's worker or pastoral carer. But it's all the work of the Kingdom.

More than that, the Kingdom is always going out to find people: at dawn; and at lunchtime; and at teatime; and even at the very end of the day, when all hope seems lost. The Kingdom never stops looking for people to come into the vineyard, into the fields, into wherever God's work needs to be done. And it never fails to reward those who come.

And God is also entirely uninterested in how much work we have done when it comes to assigning us value or giving us our reward. And the value of our work is judged by God, not by the other workers! As long as we have joined the effort, answered the call, we are God's workers and that's what matters to God.

But that's unfair, right? Can it really be that it doesn't matter to God if we've been life-long servants or Jonny-come-latelies – everyone gets the same reward? How can that be what happens?

But Jesus says, yes, this is how it is. The last will be first, and the first will be last. Humility means knowing and accepting our place. After all, we don't work for God just to be rewarded! Christian life should be centred on a passionate love for and a growing relationship with Jesus Christ. I don't *feel* that all the time, but I know that it's there, and I long for the times when I do feel it more.

The reward is God's to give, from our daily bread to eternal life. If we start the work knowing what we will receive, we mustn't begrudge those who get the same reward but haven't laboured as we have. That resentment, that selfishness, we have to put aside.

We are the workers in the parable – we are called to work in God’s service, to labour for as long as there is need, in the sure hope that we will receive what God promised. This means we must see our resources of time and money and skill as there to be called upon by all those who work on our behalf in the Kingdom’s service. That means church, charities, community work, social justice, environmental protection and all the many ways that God’s Kingdom must come on Earth as it is in heaven.

Because we are also the landlord. We are the inheritors of the Kingdom, the children of God, called to follow God’s own example. That means we reach out to people who ask for help – at the right time and at the wrong time. We don’t reward people based on how useful they’ve been to us but on what they need. It means that we stand our ground in acting with this radical, God-centred, ridiculous generosity.

Even when it offends and outrages us and those around us.

Because those are the laws of the Kingdom in which we live.