

Julie's sermon – 20th September 2020

Matthew 20: 1-16 Labourers in the Vineyard

It is human nature isn't it to want our fair share and we somehow feel cheated when we don't think we are getting it or that someone else is getting more than their fair share. She has more than me! His piece is bigger than mine! I want the same as them! All familiar cries and I am sure as adults we have all heard them from the children around us. But it is not just the children who feel this way. They may voice it but if we are really honest then we too have felt this way. We don't like to see others get what they have not earned or what they don't deserve. We mumble, and moan, we sulk and shake our heads when we see apparent unfairness in life.

The me, me, me society that we live in reinforces our desire to see others get only what we think they deserve. If someone works hard then we like to see them get ahead. We don't like free riders who expect life to give them something for nothing. And this is also often true in church too, we like it just fine that **we** have received grace, but we soon moan if we see grace active in the life of someone whom we think, frankly, doesn't deserve it or who hasn't proven themselves a worthy recipient – someone who doesn't come to church for instance or who doesn't do anything to help others.

The parable of the laborers in the vineyard is Jesus' in-your-face attempt to make us see that it is not us who has the power to decide who is and who is not worthy of grace that is down to God.

Like most parables, the basic story is very simple and very mundane. A farmer needs workers to get his grapes harvested. So at the crack of dawn he finds some eager men lined up looking for work.

He hires them, promising a denarius for their trouble. These people work literally from sun-up to sundown, a solid twelve hours of labor including right through the heat of the day.

But the farmer doesn't make do with just this group of men – he goes out again and again at 9am, noon, 3pm, and even as late as 5pm (a mere 1 hour before quitting time – as the NIV says it was the eleventh hour.) the farmer keeps hiring more men, handing them empty bushel baskets and telling them to fill 'em up with grapes.

When the farmer goes out the last time and sees men still standing in the square he asks them "Why have you been standing here all day doing nothing?" "Because no-one has hired us" the men say. "Go and help to finish off the work and you will be paid fairly". These men must have given up hope of earning anything that day and were probably wondering how they were going to feed their families that night. So can you imagine how they must have felt when the farmer told them to go and help to finish the harvest? They probably thought they would get only a few pence but hey it was better than nothing – at least they could get something to eat.

Jesus is of course setting us up. We are already looking at these men and shaking our heads because they aren't going to get very much for just an hours work. But then Jesus twists the tale a little; he makes sure that these one-hour pickers get paid *first*. Had they been paid last, well, there would not have been much punch to this parable. But instead Jesus' fictional farmer makes a point of ensuring that the people who worked the longest witnessed the fact that latecomers got paid one whole denarius.

However, that was not the moment that brought about the anger. Being fair-minded men with a firm sense of right and wrong, they assumed that the going rate for this vineyard was one denarius per hour. And oh what a happy evening it would be in their households

if they could come home with twelve denarii in their pocket! How wonderful it would be to swing by the shop on the way home and at long last be able to afford a nice treat for the children, maybe even some flowers for the wife and one of those better brands of wine to go with dinner for once. Except of course it didn't happen that way at all.

Everyone got the same pay.

I don't know about you but I can just imagine the look on the faces of these 12-hour workers the moment the foreman plopped a single denarius into their sweaty palms. They stared at the coin in disbelief and then looked askance. One of them finally whispers, "Can you *believe* this!?"

The master overhears them and he reminds them that he had cheated no one. This was the contract they agreed to at dawn that day.

"And as for the rest," he goes on, "what's that to you? You're not out anything. I can do what I want with my own money. So don't pout and moan at me and scorn my generosity!"

And that is the point of this parable; the generosity of God at giving us what we don't deserve – that's grace, and that is what Jesus is showing us. It turns everything on its head. When we know and love God and we read the bible regularly then we know that he showers his grace on the most undeserving people. Fishermen, tax collectors, lepers, prostitutes, believers and none believers, the sick and the lame, the rich and the poor, the educated and the none educated alike. This story tells us that God's grace is the same for everyone.

It is not for us to say who can and cannot be given God's grace that is between them and God. We should only be concerned with ourselves and we should be thankful that God has poured out his grace on us.

But we are only human and we will at some point feel that someone has got more than his fair share; so what do we do when those thoughts infiltrate our hearts and minds. Maybe we can use those times as an opportunity to meditate again on the cross and on exactly what it took to save not just other people but you and me as well. We need God's grace as much as the next person.

If we have known the grace and love of God all our lives then we should rejoice and be thankful because the alternative is to have lived without his amazing love and for me that's just not an option. If we have come to know the love of God later in our lives then we should all rejoice with you because Jesus was always looking for the lost sheep. It doesn't matter when we come to know the love and grace of God for ourselves – what is important is that we do.

When Jesus comes again and the only way we can enter the Kingdom is through His grace and not by anything we have done then let us pray that as many as possible have come to know him. And remember that final verse this morning the last will be first and the first last and never worry or fret because others seem to be getting more than their fair share because it is all in the hands of God and pray that he will give you grace enough to enter the Kingdom of heaven whether you have been in the vineyard for the full 12 hours or you came in at the eleventh hour.

AMEN