

## **BIBLICAL REFLECTION** *for Trinity 15 (20 September)* **Matthew 20:1-16**

One of the more fascinating aspects of our Christian faith is the reality that suggests if we were to put Mother Teresa, St. Augustine, John the Baptist, and two or three of you into a room together, you would all be equal in the sight of God. Each, regardless of their background, intellect, or level of faith, would be seen as at one with the essence of what it is to be a believer. There is something reassuring about that, not least when we feel within ourselves somewhat inadequate or perhaps weak before God. If scripture is to be believed, the whole assembly has an equal and rightful relationship with God – and that is what makes faith attractive and manageable.

Too often, sadly, we – both as an institution and sometimes as individuals – fall foul of the "grumbling" attitude seen in today's scripture. We consider that our interpretation, our practice, our attitude, our expectations are all the correct ones to follow; that our way of organising our faith, of allowing an image to evolve, of "advertising" such – all is the 'right' way, and as such, the way by which all others should aspire and follow. We make newcomers welcome, we attract them to us, we enthuse about so much – and then they arrive – and they comment, they have their own interpretation on life, and they fall foul of our displeasure, or even our wrath. "They don't belong," we say; "They don't fit in," "They can't think like that, practice like that, believe or do things like that" – and we work at it until we quite possibly drive them away. Life, unfortunately, is never straightforward, not even in our faith.

Today's extract from Matthew reminds us of this. It is a clear parable, possibly needing little explanation beyond its impact on each of our consciences. Here is a character – quite possibly God – offering generous grace to all whom he encounters; here are many enjoying that grace; and here are a few disgruntled by the generosity of that grace. How dare 'they' get more of God than 'me', they seem to say. I have slogged long and hard, I have witnessed and prayed, I have organised and fulfilled – all they have done is meander in, pop their heads around the door, smile, and offer little else. What makes them so special?

What makes them special is that all are special. And all should be seen as special – special in the eyes of God, whose eyes should be the only ones relevant to the story. The eyes of all involved should be focussing upon that same benefactor, not piercingly drilling into the contemporaries around. As I look back over nearly forty years' worth of random congregations I have stared down at from pulpits and altars, I have seen the great panoply of humanity that has tried, succeeded, and sometimes failed to engage with an interpretation of faith as portrayed by myself. I have watch individuals grow, stay and leave. I have seen others encourage, support and reject. I have seen the system at large do the same. My ministry has lived through the great debates about the role of women in the Church, of attitudes to gay people, of the divide between catholic and evangelical, between sacrament and word – and it has been a mix of both encouraging signs of unity before God, and of downright hatred in spite of God. The earlier notion of 'specialness' has often been obscured by faction and a vileness that seems to exude from some so-called Christians. Today's scripture is an internal memo, if you like, to all of us, to recalibrate our ways if we want to enjoy the fruits of God's grace.

For the vast majority, inevitably, this all passes them by, and thankfully so. Amongst us all are folk who are quietly going about their faith, engaging with their God, and playing their individual part within the corporate body. Their prayers and their witness commends them to God in a way that ensures the true essence of the faith remains. That is why we are here, that is why we witness, that is why we enjoy it. Whilst human instinct may indeed make us stop-and-think at times, we continue to believe in the vitality of grace directing much of who we are. That is what separates us from the rest – that is what leads us to labour in this vineyard. It matters not what time we arrived – what matters is that we did indeed arrive – and we waited upon God when we did.

And here we are, despite the bizarre nature of the vineyard we currently find ourselves in; here we are serving, witnessing, praying and being alongside each other at a time of crisis and uncertainty. Here we are, hopefully exuding that same grace towards one another. And here hopefully we shall remain in the comfort and security of our faith.

But what of those who have left, who have drifted away, who now feel that the vineyard is no longer open to them – how does God's grace stretch towards them? As I have been sorting out many things whilst packing, I am continually bumping into photos, notes and mementoes of past years here at St. Mark's, and inevitably seeing the faces and names of those who were once deep within this particular vineyard, and yet now walk on the opposite side of Reading Road as they pass by this Church. I do not always know why that occurs – but what today's parable perhaps sharply asks of me is: were they welcomed? Were they nurtured? Were they valued? Were they allowed to breathe? Were they able to view God?

A perpetual challenge we no doubt will always face – and you as a congregation will inevitably be facing as the future looms up before you – this challenge will be to ensure that the vineyard is open, is functioning, is able to absorb all whom God gathers and encourages. The richness of the harvest in our scripture today is left unsaid, but the fact that it required so many labourers throughout the day suggests an abundance – an abundance of God's grace freely available, ready to be gathered, accessible and ripe, and offered to all at the same rate and level, revealing as that most definitely does, the true richness of the One God for One People.

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