

Today we are starting a new season of sermons exploring the Kingdom of Heaven which is at the heart of all Jesus' teaching because to quote his words from Matthew 7: 21 :

“Not everyone who says to me ‘Lord, Lord’, will enter the Kingdom of Heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father’

So, to put it more colloquially, just paying lip service to Jesus' teachings is not sufficient to enjoy eternal life in Heaven. We need to live by the values and truth of the Kingdom of Heaven otherwise in the words of Private Frazer from Dad's Army “We're doomed Mr Mainwaring, we're all doomed.”

Some people use the expression Kingdom of Heaven whilst others prefer to say Kingdom of God. You pays your penny and takes your choice; they are one and the same.

Today I'm looking at what is called ‘the upside down kingdom’ – when you follow Jesus, ordinary life gets turned upside down; take surprising turns - it is counter cultural thinking.

In other words, expect the unexpected.

A man and his wife rushed into the dentists and the man said “Quick Doc, I've no time to waste, my golfing partner is in my car outside waiting and we are supposed to tee off in 30 minutes. Forget about the anaesthetic, I haven't got time for the gums to go numb. Pull the tooth quick and just let me get to the course”.

Wow, thought the Dentist..... here's a real true life stoic then asked the man “Which tooth is it?” and the man turned to his wife and said “Open your mouth darling and show the dentist”

Expect the unexpected.

I've decided to rename today's parable from ‘The labourers in the Vineyard’ to the parable of the compassionate employer. Let me explain why.

To me the focus of the story is not the workers, but the employer. It is a story showing the amazing compassion and grace of the employer towards the unemployed. That deep concern is augmented by his generosity at the end of the day. His attitude and action is in stark contrast to that of the employees.

Expect the unexpected.

Early one morning when we were in Jerusalem last year I saw from my hotel bedroom window a large group of men gathered near a lay by and a bus pulled up and the driver got out and pointed to some of the waiting men who excitedly got on board until eventually the bus was full and drove off, leaving at least 30 men behind and slowly but surely they all walked off with very downcast eyes and long faces.

I knew immediately what was happening. As a fit 17 year old in the school summer holidays of 1968 I too used to stand at a lay by waiting for a bus to arrive at 5.30am; if it arrived it meant I would be working in the fields – walking through wheat fields uprooting any rogue barley growing amidst the crop if I was lucky or potato picking or potato grading if I was unlucky.

There was no guarantee the bus would turn up and if it did sometimes there would only be 3 or 4 places left, and that's exactly what those men in Jerusalem were waiting for – in hope and no doubt in some cases in desperation, to be chosen to do back breaking work in the fields for a daily wage; in other words a wage which would just be sufficient to keep a family fed for 1 day.

In my case and for those in Jerusalem, once the bus had gone, that was it; no further chance of earning.

In the parable the first chosen workers agree to work the whole day for the usual daily wage, no doubt in the hope that if they are seen to be hard working they will be employed for a second day or perhaps even longer. Those left behind understood the situation, they would not earn that day; there would be no second chance.

Expect the unexpected.

But the owner returns and recruits more men, but does not quote what he will pay them other than to say “I will pay you whatever is right” and then twice more at noon and 3 o’clock. And then, amazingly a fifth time at about 5 o’clock – just one hour before sundown and the end of the working day. And he doesn’t say what or even if he will pay them.

Surely a well organised vineyard owner would know how much work needed to be completed so how many men he would need to hire? There’s nothing in the story which suggests this is an inexperienced or incompetent owner so why then does he return every 3 hours to recruit more workers?

So we have the scenario that the owner has engaged five different groups of workers and only the first group know what they will be paid. The others are working on trust, particularly the last group who have only worked for 1 hour.

Expect the unexpected.

Suddenly a manager appears on the scene and is told to pay the workers. Hang on a moment....why wasn’t the estate manager doing the recruitment? Why wasn’t he going out every 3 hours in the heat of the day? Why wasn’t the manager left to...well.... manage the estate?

Expect the unexpected

The manager is told to pay the last group first and to pay them the daily wage. Now, that was totally against tradition both by paying those who had only worked the shortest before everyone else but also to pay them a full day’s wage.

If the first group had been paid first, then they would have gone home happy. But by doing it this upside-down way, they stand there getting increasingly anxious. They see people who have worked for just 1 hour get paid exactly the same as they will get for working all day...and their resentment gathers more force as those employed at 3 o’clock, then those employed from noon and nine o’clock all get the same too!

But surely, they reason, we will receive more because we had worked the longest! And when they don’t, they are quick to complain.

I saw this resentment first hand when I paid a Christmas bonus to my staff of four at the end of my small company’s first year of trading. Two had been with me for the whole year; a third had joined me six months previously and the fourth had only been employed for two months.

Without thinking, I gave all of them the same amount. Within five minutes or so, the two who had been with me all year marched up to me and started complaining it was unfair that they everyone had got the same.

This was a freebe – no bonus payment was written into their contract, yet they were quite stropky about it. I was reminded of this only the other day when I heard a mother ask her son who was obviously complaining he didn’t have something his friends had “why can’t you be grateful for what you have rather than what we don’t have”? Very apt, given the attitude of the first group of workers.

But before my halo gets too brilliant; please note nobody got a bonus the following year.

Back to the first workers....This is not the complaint of the underpaid.....no one is underpaid in this parable.....the first group willingly signed up for the daily wage. No, the complaint is from those who cannot tolerate the grace of the owner – just like the elder brother of the returning prodigal son – who throws a complete wobbly because his wayward brother has not done a single thing to be treated on equal terms by their father.

What the first group are actually saying is that their worth as human beings is directly related to how much they earn.

But as the owner's response shows; this is not a model for employment it is a model for what it means to be committed to Kingdom principals.

Expect the unexpected. Let me explain

In God's Kingdom it is the workers who are more important than the work – yet don't we tend to measure our worth based on our accomplishments? How well we've done, how much we've achieved? Where we live, how expensive our car is? The upside down value here is that we need to help people accept their worth is not based on what they have done or what they have achieved but who they are.

How many times do you hear of Jesus hobnobbing with the gentry? How many times do you hear of Jesus mixing with the underclass of society; the manual workers, the prostitutes, the tax collectors? The upside down kingdom is where justice includes respect for the dignity of those in need and a deep concern for their welfare. That is why committing to our Indian and Ugandan links is so important and so integral to Kingdom values and principles.

The Pharisees taught that God's grace should be solely available to the righteous, like themselves, who kept the law. In contrast Jesus was constantly mixing with those people shunned by the Pharisees. The upside down kingdom is where God loves equally the righteous and the sinner. He loves us for who we are, not what we do.

Expect the unexpected

The owner could have sent his estate manager but *chose* not to. He went personally to demonstrate compassion to those who were in need. The owner gave what was agreed to the first group of workers but *chose* to pay every man a living wage, regardless of how long they had worked.

Living in the kingdom always involves choice.

The culture we live in screams at us that we should do all we can to be accumulate wealth and prestige. The counter culture nature of the upside down kingdom says wealth and prestige are irrelevant. What is important is that we should do all we can to be just, merciful and compassionate three core values in God's kingdom.

So to end, the final words of the parable are "the last will be first, and the first will be last". The Pharisees were sure that they would be the first to enter into God's Kingdom of Heaven because of their total commitment and hard work in observing the law; those who in their opinion were undeserving to enter Heaven would be last.

No, Jesus is saying....it's not what you do but who you are that counts and just like those whose lives are governed by the values of the kingdom taught by Christ and become to believe in him, no matter how late in the day, will be amongst the first who come to enjoy eternal life in the Kingdom of heaven and those like the Pharisees will be the last.

Expect the unexpected in the upside down Kingdom of Heaven where the last will be the first and the first will be the last.

It is not in our world where our importance or greatness will be seen or achieved but in God's Kingdom. Or, as David prayed in our Chronicles reading "Yours O lord, are the greatness, the power, the glory, the victory, and the majesty, for all that is in the heavens and on the earth is yours. Yours is the Kingdom, O Lord.

I'll say amen to that, even in the upside down Kingdom of Heaven.

