

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. ² He agreed to pay them a denarius^[a] for the day and sent them into his vineyard.

³ "About nine in the morning he went out and saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing. ⁴ He told them, 'You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.' ⁵ So they went.

"He went out again about noon and about three in the afternoon and did the same thing. ⁶ 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?'

⁷ "'Because no one has hired us,' they answered.

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

⁸ "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.'

⁹ "The workers who were hired about five in the afternoon came and each received a denarius. ¹⁰ So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius. ¹¹ When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner. ¹² '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.'

¹³ "But he answered one of them, 'I am not being unfair to you, friend. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius?' ¹⁴ Take your pay and go. I want to give the one who was hired last the same as I gave you. ¹⁵ Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?'

¹⁶ "So the last will be first, and the first will be last."

The workers in the vineyard

Jesus's parables usually have a sharp point to them — something surprising about them, and often *someone* feels the point of the parable keenly. In the parable of the workers in the vineyard there is definitely a great surprise, and most of us feel that the story is unjust — we *all* feel the point of the parable!

All you need to know by way of context is that a denarius was a normal day's wage for manual labour, that unemployment was a significant problem for day labourers, and trust being low, they would expect to be paid daily. Also, when a vineyard is mentioned, everyone at the time understood this to mean Israel — not least because of Isaiah chapter 5.

The story is told well, with plenty of tension, building expectation in sympathy with the first workers, that they might receive a higher wage than was initially promised. And you know that this hope is disappointed, and they grumble. And it is obvious that the landlord is God, and the workers are those who have been called by God to serve, which is to say: every believer.

What we learn — or are reminded, is that God's generosity is much beyond our own idea of fairness. We see that no one receives less than they deserve. But some receive far more. No doubt you can see how this may have been read at different stages in history. To the audience of Jesus's day, Jesus deliberately rubs the noses of pharisees and other 'religious types' in the grace that he proclaims to a wider circle — to tax collectors and prostitutes who have found faith and, as it were, started work in the vineyard late in the day.

In the first century of Christianity, Jewish Christians may have felt the same about gentile converts. In any age, those who have served a lifetime may resent deathbed conversions. And outside the faith we know that some in employment resent those who are on benefits. If the church has been the arbiter of moral acceptability for centuries, some in the church may resent the grace shown by society towards, say, gay and trans people?

You may have noticed that this story resembles another well know parable — the prodigal son. While the prodigal actively turns away from his family and lives selfishly, the workers in the vineyard are, as far as we know idle for lack of anyone employing them — not because they are lazy, or refused to work. But the point of similarity is the grace shown towards both the prodigal and the workers who were hired late in the day; and also the resentment shown by the brother, or those who worked all day.

So, the point of the story is to highlight God's *unfair goodness* — and to recognise that this unfairness *is good!* And the point of highlighting this unfair goodness is that we should know this, and wrestle with it, and also love it, and be inspired by it, and shaped by it. We could be randomly and unfairly generous! Next time you go out with a friend and buy a coffee you could pay for the coffee of the next person in the queue. No one's going to say — 'that's unfair! You should have paid for everyone's coffee in the whole shop!' They will recognise that this was a peculiarly kind act.

When we give to charity, we must admit that we cannot help all the people in the world who need help. But we can be unfairly generous towards some. The landlord in Jesus's story was unfairly generous towards those who otherwise had earned nothing — in a world with no welfare state. Let that inform us: we need not be unfairly generous in a way that may earn us favours with the rich and famous. We should be unfairly generous to those with a rough deal in life and who cannot pay us back, except in simple gratitude.

I began by observing that this parable causes indignation to most people. Let's finish with a simple question: How much is our imagination shaped by law, or by grace? The answer to this may be a measure of our reaction to this parable.

Amen.

Sunday October 8th

From Crime to Christianity.

Come and hear Sean's story



***Join us at 9.30am
for croissants and coffee
Worship starts at 10am
Everyone is Welcome***

