

**2014-09-21 Sue Diggory**

**Trinity 14**

**Matthew 20 1 – 16**

### **The Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard**

You've heard, I've heard it ... we've all heard it. **Life isn't fair!**

Do you remember as a teenager pleading to stay out late – everyone is allowed out until 11 o'clock except me, I'm the only one who has to be home by 10 - **it's not fair!** Or perhaps feeling really hard done by when your older brother or sister got more pocket money – why should they get more, we all have the same needs, we all have to pay the same for the price for everything, and of course the cry went up **it's not fair.** Or even worse when a distant aunt or uncle sent them a bigger birthday present, just because they were older! And being the youngest I always thought, of course that **it was not fair!**

Life isn't fair and on first glance that is what our Gospel passage seems to be telling us, or is it?

Is it about life not being fair or is it about living by a different set of rules where it isn't that life isn't fair but more a case of life being turned **upside down** that what we can easily see as being unfair is in fact 'good news for all'.

The Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard, or the Parable of Equal Wages for Unequal Work, to give it a rather more unsettling title is only found in Matthew's Gospel and is one of the 'For the Kingdom of Heaven is like ...' stories where Jesus is trying to explain to the disciples the

implications of living life under new rules, his rules, Kingdom rules, rules that are good news for all.

The landowner went out early, probably about 6.00am when the Jewish working day started and hired some men for the day. Payment was agreed – a denarius, the going rate for a day's work and all seemed happy. Three hours later he went back to the market place and hired another group of men, again after another three hours and another three hours after that. Four groups of workers hired to work in the vineyard at regular intervals during the day. The harvest must have been fantastic that year, because he went back to the market place one more time 'at the eleventh hour' when there was only about an hour of the working day left and hired the stragglers that were left in the market place, the ones that **nobody** had wanted to employ and sent them off to work for him. Everything seemed to be going fine – that is until the foreman paid out the wages.

First those who came 'at the eleventh hour' were paid, and then all the groups of workers until finally those who had been there all day were paid out. So far so good, but they were in for a shock as the usual rules were not followed. All received a denarius, the going rate, the agreed rate for a day's work. I'm sure those who had come late were thrilled with their wages, but what about those who had been out in the vineyard since early morning working through 'the heat of the day'?

They began to grumble! I'm sure they all thought that **it wasn't fair!**

I wonder what the Unions would have to say about such practice today. How would the local shop steward deal with such an employer? How would he deal with someone who in his eyes just **wasn't being fair!**

But if we look closely at the situation we see that the landowner **had** kept his promise to the first group of workers – a denarius for a day's work, the going rate that was agreed before they set to work, they were not being 'short-changed', the contract was fulfilled, it was rather that he had decided to pay the same wage to those who had arrived later in the day, he had decided to be generous and treat them all the same, to give them all the same reward for working for him without worrying about how many hours they had put in.

So what does this tell us about the Kingdom and the rules God applies as he transcends our ideas of fairness as he brings his good news to all? Unlike the landowner God is not in the business of paying wages, God is in the business of gracious giving; giving as he chooses so we cannot work our way into his favour.

The disciples needed to understand, as do we, that the amount of time we have been 'working in the vineyard' makes no difference to the way God the 'landowner' will treat us. He has no favourites and like the landowner treats all of us the same – we are all equally deserving of his grace, all equally deserving of his love, all equally valuable in his eyes, no matter how long we have been members of his kingdom, and to those of us who have been in the vineyard for a long time that can seem just a bit galling at times – but perhaps that says more about our lack of

love and mercy towards others, perhaps we are less 'grace' orientated and more 'law' orientated at times than we realise!

However, if we apply Kingdom rules rather than our rules, if we allow the upside down and good news for all principle to apply rather than our 'it isn't fair' grumble we begin to see things very differently as we start to look with kingdom eyes and change our attitudes. We see that God's grace applies equally to all who love him and that our desire to serve him should come out of our love for him and not because it will make him love us more and treat us better because that is impossible. We also begin to see that length of service makes no difference either – whether we have followed Christ all our lives or like the last group of workers, the ones that nobody wanted come very late into the Kingdom.

It makes no difference to how God sees us, or how he treats us. We are all unworthy before God, and there is no ranking in God's kingdom because we are all equally rewarded, because God's good news really is good news for all.

So what then, should be our motivation for service? Should it be for reward - no of course not, it should be an expression of gratitude for what Christ has done for us, and a desire for others as yet outside the kingdom to experience the same joy of knowing God's love in their lives. The parable tells us that the last group of workers were those who no-one wanted to hire, those who were perhaps considered useless and hopeless as workers, those that the first group of workers 'grumbled' that the landowner was being generous to.

These are of course the very people that God wants to welcome back into his kingdom, some are the kind of people that society often rejects today, but others are just ordinary people like us, people who get up each day and lead very ordinary lives but lives that are lacking because they lack the known presence of God; these are all people that He wants us to welcome as well, because our welcome will help him make his presence known.

These will be people that might just be open to an invitation from you – to come with you to this year’s Harvest thanksgiving service and lunch, or perhaps to our service on Remembrance Sunday – the neighbour you haven’t made much effort to get to know, or maybe the friend you play golf with every week, these are people who just might respond positively to such an invitation – even if when they do come they will need help finding their way around the way we do things here on a Sunday!

Katherine Jefferts Schorri the Presiding Bishop in the Episcopal Church in the USA said “consider who it is we would most like to get rid of. That person, my friend, is the image of Christ in our midst’

Perhaps her words will help us to remember that we are all made in the image of Christ and we can and do meet him in many people that we may consider unlovely both outside and inside his kingdom, and as members of that kingdom where **upside down** rules apply, where the good news is not only for all, but for all in equal measure; and where we must seek to continually

allow Christ's attitudes to shape our behaviour and lifestyle, where saying **'it's not fair'** doesn't apply, and where we should be prepared to stand aside and put ourselves last, because in God's economy, the good news really is for all because of his amazing and generous grace.

Amen