

Philippians 1:21-end**Matthew 20:1-16****Introduction**

When I first came to the Benefice my niece, who lived in Hitchin worked in Cambridge and every working day she drove up the A10 at about 7.0 am and she would see a group of people standing together outside the Motel. They appeared to be workers waiting to be picked up and taken somewhere. This last year, in the cost of living crisis, we have become used to almost daily strikes by rail workers, doctors, nurses, teaches, university lecturers and other people asking for a fairer wage. Employment, fair pay and survival are very current topics.

So Jesus' parable of what has been described as 'The Eccentric Employer' should speak to us on many levels. This parable is not meant to reflect normal economic practice, nor to be a pattern for labour relations; as with so many of Jesus' parables it can be applied on more than one level. There is a clear message for the religious people' Jesus' followers and the Jews but there is also a deeper message of God's nature that is about fairness, generosity and compassion.

As so often in the stories Jesus told he takes an image from the everyday life of his audience. This story reflects the kind of thing that could happen in the market place of any village or town in Israel when the Grape Harvest was underway.

The Market Place was the equivalent of a labour exchange in today's world. The men who were standing there were not street corner idlers. The men in the market place were waiting for work in the same way as the men who stood outside the Motel. The fact that some of them stayed there until 5 pm is proof of how desperately they wanted it. These men were hired labourers – the lowest class of workers and life for them was always desperately precarious. Slaves and servants were regarded as being, at least to some extent, attached to the family and were within the family group. Their fortunes could vary according to the fortune of the family. But, in normal times, they would never be in danger of imminent starvation. It was very different for the hired laborers who were entirely at the mercy of chance employment and the people who employed them. They lived on the semi-starvation line.

A denarius was a day's wage – not overgenerous and it didn't leave much over but it was considered fair. The hours described in the story were normal hours of a Jewish working day which would begin at six in the morning and end at six at night.

So why did Jesus tell this story? Was he launching into labour relations?

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To understand the original meaning of the parable we need to look at the context. It is the continuation of a discussion Jesus had with his disciples after a rich young man had come to Jesus to ask what he needed to do to inherit eternal life. Jesus had identified that for this man his great wealth was a barrier to inheriting the Kingdom. And in fact it was so; the young man wasn't prepared to give up his belongings in order to enter the Kingdom of God. This exchange left the disciples a bit shaken and Peter asked Jesus, "*We have left everything to follow you! What then will there be for us?*"

So Jesus tells this story which is a warning to his disciples and also to the Jewish leaders. The message to his disciples was along these lines: You have had the privilege of coming into the Christian Church very early in its life. At a later stage others will come in. You mustn't claim a special honour and a special place because you were Christians before they were. All people, no matter when they come in to the church are equally precious to God.

There are people who because they have been members of a church for a long time think that the church practically belongs to them and they can dictate its policy. They might resent the intrusion of new blood or the rise of a new generation with different plans and different ways. The point Jesus is making is that in His church seniority doesn't necessarily mean honour.

He is giving an equally definite warning to the Jewish leaders. They know that they were God's 'chosen people' and they would never willingly forget that. As a consequence they looked down on the Gentiles. Usually they hated and despised them and hoped for nothing but their destruction. This attitude threatened to be carried forward into the Christian church. If the Gentiles were to be allowed into the fellowship of the church at all they must come in as inferiors. "In God's economy," someone has said "there is no such thing as a most favoured nation clause". Christianity knows nothing of the concept of a 'Master race'.

So these are the original lessons of the parable but it has very much more to say to us.

1. The love of God. No matter when someone enters the Kingdom: when they are very young, middle aged or at the end of their lives they are all equally dear to God and can be sure of a welcome
2. The infinite compassion of God. And we see an element of tenderness in this parable. There is nothing more tragic than

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someone who is unemployed. In the great depression of the 1930's the mass unemployment of the nineteen eighties we saw people lose hope and dignity as their talents were wasted because there was nothing gainful for them to do. In that market place men stood waiting because no one had hired them. In compassion the master hired them because he could not bear to see them idle. In strict justice the fewer hours a man worked the less pay he received but in this story the master knew well that the denarius a day was no great wage. If a workman went home with less there would be a worried wife and hungry children; and therefore he went beyond justice and gave them more than their due

3. The generosity of God. These men did not all do the same work but they all received the same pay. This teaches us two lessons:

All service ranks the same with God. –It isn't the amount of service given but the love and care with which it is given that matters.

We cannot earn what God gives us, we cannot deserve it. What God gives us is given out of the goodness of his heart. What gives us is not pay but a gift, not a reward but grace.

Jesus' teaching on the Kingdom of heaven in matthew's Gospel is radical, powerful and demanding. It is nothing less than the transformation of our lives so we can live them in the service of the King who also serves. We are called to do this in a fallen world, the values, ambitions and goals of which are so different from the ones Jesus sets before us. Yet this is the calling of every Christian and God gives us the resources to do it.

The challenge of this parable to us speaks on a spiritual level and a practical level. These past few years we have seen poverty bite in families where both parents are working, we have seen refugees arriving in our country with nothing as they flee the horrors of war and injustice, we have seen people lose their homes and livelihoods in multiple natural disasters: in flood, and fire and storm and earthquake. How do we respond?

Do we respond with the righteous indignation of the workers in the parable who had worked all day and expected a higher reward because of it or with the compassionate generosity of the master who welcomes all and provides for all?

There are many inequalities in our present world. One of the things that upsets me most is the people in Africa, South America and Asia who work

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desperately long hours to produce special foods and other goods for the people of Europe and America. The farmer who toils to produce mange toux and baby corn and tropical fruit only to see it all taken away, not being able to eat any of it, who goes home to a bowl of meal porridge while the fruits of his labours are flown at great expense to the people of the UK and America who have become used to eating foods at any season of the year not counting the cost to our planet and the people who work to produce it for us.

I pray that we would, in our relative wealth and ease learn to be compassionate and generous like the master, our Lord God.