

SERMON AT NORTH MIDLANDS: 22/9/96: GEOFF CHADWICK:

OS 25: Mtt 20:1-15: "A FAIR WAGE"

The parable of the workers in the vineyard, like most of Jesus parables, is a story full of symbols which point to something else. Let me examine some of these symbols with you.

The Landowner.

The Landowner represents God. God goes out to hire workers for his vineyard. In other words God has work for us to do. We are not just passive recipients of God's blessing but are meant to be actively working in the world for God.

Work.

In this parable the work referred to is the work of evangelism. Working in the vineyard means letting people know about the goodness of God. The early church would have understood this parable well. The church was young and had much to do. People had to be convinced by the Gospel. The needy required care. Leadership, structure and mission all needed to be developed. Much had to be done.

The church is now very old. A lot of the early work has been done. We know our mission, we have our structures and our leadership patterns. But the world has changed. The old structures, the old ways of doing our work, how we used to conduct our mission, seem not to be working any more. We have work to do a-fresh. New structures for the 21st century have to be found, new ways of expressing the Gospel for the modern mind need to be developed, and reformulating the mission for an unchurched world is a high priority. Certainly! There is still work to be done in God's vineyard. Responsible work, caring work, joyful work, and hard work out in the heat of the Sun.

The Early Labourers.

By the time this parable was written down the early church had been around long enough to have a tradition of "founders". These were the people who had worked hard for the church for

a long time and were the "pillars" of the organization. These founders had done much good work but as they got older they began to mistrust the new, younger workers for the church.

Reading this parable makes this very clear. Hear verses 11-12 again:

"And when [the early labourers] received [their wage], they grumbled against the landowner, saying, 'These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat' (Mtt 20: 11-12, NRSV).

All organizations, communities, families and churches suffer from this problem. It is a difficult problem because no one wants to be-grudge the work of the old founders. In fact their work should be honoured and respected but so too should the work of the Late workers. We must always find ways of allowing the "old guard" to give way to the "new guard" in a gracious and respectful manner.

There is a good expression of this in military ritual. At the changing of the guard in military ritual there are two very symbolic events.

Firstly, the new guard approaches the old guard and salutes them. This is an act of recognition. It says that the new guard respects and honours the work of the old guard.

Secondly, the old guard salutes the new guard and then stands aside for them. This action says that the old guard respects the new guard and is prepared to hand over the work to them.

So there is mutual recognition in the changing of the guard. The new respects the old by honouring what has been done, and the old respects the new by standing aside for them.

There is no grumbling!

Perhaps we in the church need to develop a similar ritual for our AGMs!

The Vineyard.

In the Old Testament the Vineyard is often used as a symbol for the Hebrew nation. In the New Testament this symbol has been widened to include the whole of the Earth. In other words, working in the vineyard is working in the Earth. God's Earth.

Where is your Vineyard? Where do you work for God? Think about it... are the vines well dressed? Are there brambles to be cleared out? Will the harvest of grapes be plentiful? Are you doing God's work in your part of his bigger vineyard?

The Late Labourers.

As I said before, these are the ones who have come to faith (or work in the church) late in life. They receive the same wage as the Early Workers. Why? Because they were promised the same reward. What God promises God gives.

Let us not begrudge the "Johnny come latelys" . According to God their work is of as much value as those who have gone before.

The Wage.

Various interpretations can be put on the wage. It could mean material benefits, or spiritual benefits or the gift of eternal life itself. In another sense it could also mean God's honour. This is how I like to look at it. A wage is paid in honour of the work that someone has done. God is offering us his honour. God honours our work. What we do for him does not go unnoticed.

Perhaps this is a word of hope. Sometimes I think we labour away without much joy. Our efforts seem to come to nothing, or we seem to have been mis-directed. The knowledge that God honours even our feeble or tiresome efforts is enough to keep us going.

Where is your vineyard?

Is there work to be done?

Are you an old guard or a new guard?

The Lord be with you.

And also with you.