

Sunday Between 18th and 24th September [25]

Matthew 20:1-16

Have you ever noticed in a large church service that the order of the procession seems to be a little bit back to front? In many areas of life people are ordered in descending order of authority or importance but in the church we order ourselves differently. In a large diocesan service you will find the ordination candidates lead the procession at the front and the bishop is the very last to enter the church at the back. In some ways it seems a little unfair that in these large, nerve wracking events we send out those with the least experience to lead the way while those perhaps best placed to know what to do follow along behind. But the basis for this ordering is the message from today's gospel reading, the first will be last and the last first.

The symbolic ordering at the large church service is symbolic of the intent behind the ordering of church communities on the ground. We are not places where leaders revel in their importance, rather, we are communities where leadership is based on service and the elevation of others before ourselves. It is not always evident in every situation, but it is what we are called to by Jesus, who exemplified for us what servant leadership should look like in practice. This parable, however, goes deeper than considering the ordering of church life and leadership. This parable is a lesson for us all on God's grace and the perfection of God's gift to each of us.

In the parable we are told of a vineyard owner employing people to work for him at an agreed rate. Some were employed at the beginning of the day, others came along at various times later in the day. When the wages were distributed, the latecomers were paid first, the full day's wage – very generous for a partial day's work, but entirely at the discretion of the employer. Those who had worked all day, seeing such generosity, began to imagine they would receive more than agreed because of the generosity of the employer. They were, then, disappointed to receive the same wage, the wage they agreed at the beginning, that which had originally been considered perfectly acceptable.

We can understand where the workers are coming from as we consider this story at face value. It doesn't seem fair that a short working day is worth the same as a long working day, but equally we understand that the employer is correct in being required to give no more than was agreed. But this is not just a story, this is a parable, an earthly story with a heavenly meaning, as they are sometimes described. What, then, is Jesus trying to teach us about God?

Well God is the vineyard owner, the workers are God's followers, we come to faith at various times in our lives, we work for God and witness to our faith. Some of us are born into a family of faith from which we never stray, others come to faith a short time before our life is ended, wither way, we believe as Christians that we who believe in God are saved by grace and receive the rewards God promises beyond this life. God cannot give us more than this promise offers because it is the perfect offer of life itself, there is no more to give. God can, however, offer less than that promised but God's abundant generosity in grace means we are all treated the same.

So how do we feel about that, now that we consider this story in terms of our relationship with God? Do we feel that it is fair or unfair that those who come to faith later in life or after making many mistakes in their lives are unfairly receiving God's

grace if their promise is the same as ours? Are we grateful that God's grace is so abundantly generous because we would struggle to see how we otherwise could receive it? It is worth reflecting on these questions because it has a massive effect on our relationship with one another.

Just like in the parable, the problem comes not in the agreement between the worker and the employer, that is us and God, but rather, the problem is with the grumbling amongst the various workers. Where some believe that others have been treated too generously or unfairly the discontent begins. This parable is a lesson in God's alternate view. For God, there is only love for us. The time we have loved God is irrelevant, in fact everything we do has no bearing on Grace, God's love is for us, as we are, all the time, overwhelmingly generous with the lowest bar imaginable. God can bestow upon us the gift of grace when we are willing to receive it, but we do not earn it by good deeds or lose it by bad ones. In the same way, God's radical generosity extends to people we might find difficult to love, but it doesn't matter what we think of someone, God's relationship with them is unaffected.

We are called to love God and to love our neighbour as ourselves. It's as simple as that, in love there is no jealousy or judgement, just acceptance. For those we struggle with we can at least appreciate that God loves them and recognises their worth. We don't have to know why, we don't have to understand, we just have to accept that God's grace is just that generous. For most of us, such generosity is understood in our own story as being the only way we can approach God, today's parable reminds us that we must extend that same understanding to all of God's children, our fellow workers in the vineyard of the world.