

LOOKING AHEAD: SUNDAY SEPTEMBER 24th

Reading: Matthew 20: 1 – 16 [16th After Pentecost]

The Parable of the ‘Workers in the Vineyard’ is a wonderful example of the dynamic of parables, how they create a ‘scene’ which invites hearers to consider what should be the next action (theirs, as if they have been cast into the ‘play’) [refer Introduction to Parables with “Looking Ahead” reflection on July 16]. Evidently there is some disquiet in Matthew’s community about ‘newcomers’, and the hope of Jesus’ message reaching people that existing members considered unworthy.

In the parable workers put into the fields at different times of the day are all paid the same daily wage. Then as now, this is an affront to our equal pay sensibilities. It is only ‘right’ that those working the longer hours should receive higher pay! But we forget that this is a story, not an actual event, and a story told to make a point (for which the details might be irrelevant). First century stories do not need to fit our cultural and logical expectations!

We should first take account of context. This parable follows straight away after the story of the rich young ruler who cannot forsake his worldly possessions to follow Jesus. There is no pause between chapter 19 verse 30 and chapter 20 verse 1 which begins “*For the Kingdom of Heaven is like ...*”. This is a parable given to illustrate the point of that dialogue preceding it. It is all of one piece, as the New Interpreter’s Bible notes, “*created by Matthew by taking the story of the rich man from Mark 10 (17 – 31), adding the saying about the scene of final judgement in verse 28 (which is from the separate source ‘Q’) and then this parable*” [Commentary on Matthew, page 389]. In understanding the parable of chapter 20 we need to be reminded at the outset of the words of Jesus to the rich young man that “*only God is good*”.

We need also understand the plight of the workers in this story. They are desperate for a day’s pay, seemingly not having fields of their own to work. Eugene Boring in the New Interpreter’s Bible commentary notes that “*A denarius was a normal day’s pay for manual labourers hired by the day, but was barely enough to maintain a family at subsistence level*” [Commentary on Matthew, page 393]. In their “*Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*” scholars Malina and Rohrburgh take this further. “*Day labourers*”, they argue, “*were economically amongst the poorest persons in the society. They were usually landless peasants who had lost their ancestral lands through debt and drifted into cities and villages looking for work ... the fact that it is harvest time in the story makes it more likely that those described here are not those with land of their own or they would be at home working on it*” [page 124].

The scene is one that I have personally witnessed in Israel/Palestine today. At intersection of major roadways, Palestinian workers stand hoping to be ‘picked up’ as day labourers (no longer offering in the market place). They are clearly workers who have no continuing, secure workplace to attend. Indeed, this is one of the daily repercussions of the 8-metre high concrete ‘separation’ wall that snakes across the country, dividing Palestinian populations from land, water and employment. At the crack of dawn, Palestinian manual workers gather at Israeli checkpoints, hopeful of getting a day’s permit day to cross into Israel proper where labouring work awaits. Often they are sent home denied the opportunity. What happens in the story Jesus tells is that a landowner returns to the marketplace repeatedly throughout the day to continue adding further workers. This appears to be seasonal work. Is there an urgency, perhaps necessitated by the weather, to get his task completed?

Kenneth Bailey brings wonderful first-hand cultural reflections in his “*Jesus through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels*”, noting that there is no reason to assume that the land-owner is incompetent or goes to the market place the first time not fully knowing his need of men for the day. Instead, he (Bailey) contends, the land-owner makes his initial selection of workers, “*hoping, for their sakes, that the others would soon be engaged by someone else. Three hours later he decided to check to*

see what had happened. On arrival at the unemployment corner he found many still waiting ... he selected a few (more) and (presumably) offered some word of encouragement to the others that they also would soon be selected. By noon he was confident that the rest would have found work or gone home, but he wanted to see for himself and so he returned, only to find a sad crowd" [pages 358 – 359]. It is, Bailey argues, his compassion that compelled him to check the unemployment corner yet again "*in the hope that it would be empty*". Bailey's suggestion is that they are hired not for the sake of the efficient operating of the vineyard, but for the sake of these desperate men needing to find a day's wages to feed their families. After all, how much difference are they going to make to the task needing to be accomplished when they are sent into the vineyard so late in the day? Rather, says Bailey, the master's heart has gone out to them as he visits the market-place and witnesses their hopeful waiting. He continues to think of them throughout the day's work and repeatedly returns to send more of them into his fields. The master wishes he could give them all work, and in the end, does! [Bailey pages 358-359].

In fact, Bailey with his local knowledge says that, like to so-called 'Prodigal Son', the parable of the workers in the vineyard is another wrongly-titled parable. He writes, "*The central focus of the story is the amazing compassion and grace of the employer*". He therefore re-names the parable as "The Parable of the Compassionate Employer".

Commentators note three 'unusual features' of the story as given. First, it is the land-owner himself who attends the place of employment, not the manager. Second, all workers, regardless of the time each was hired are given a denarii, a full day's pay. And third, they are paid in reverse order, the latest to take up work paid first. If the story had recorded the workers hired early morning paid their dues first then, assuming they then walk away content, the parable might not have presented the problem of their resentment and protest at the later worker's wages at all!

At the end of the day comes the reckoning', the payment of wages. The first group of workers have laboured under an agreed contract, payment of a day's wages. The last-hired, however, have taken up work on an unspecified promise; they can only trust in the goodness of the landowner.

The story hinges upon 'What is right'? [as does the linked previous one with the rich young ruler]. But this is not about the demand to be fair, to ensure people's 'rights'. As Bill Loader comments in his "First Thoughts on the Gospel Passage from the Lectionary", "*Our response to people is not to make sure they get their rights, but because they are people ... Love of this kind goes beyond human rights. It also assumes the worth of people, human dignity, need for shelter, sustenance, self determination and the like*". And for these we are dependent, not on any fair 'amount', but on people's good character and trust (in this case, the vineyard worker's), which God displays in relation to us.

Like the response of the older brother in the parable of the Prodigal Son, we don't actually know the ending. Bailey notes, "*With the master's speech, the story abruptly stops. It does not end – it stops. Just as in the parables of the prodigal son, the good Samaritan and many other stories told by Jesus, time and again the audience is placed on the stage and all listeners must finish the drama in the nitty-gritty of their own lives.*" [page 362]. This, he argues, is a technique of Gospel stories. He asks, "*Do the complaining employees obey the master's command by taking their pay and leaving, or do they opt to continue shouting at him demanding more?*" [page 357]. We don't know. Bailey is suggesting that as the recipients, the hearers of the story, is something we must decide.

The common cry of unfairness even today is that 'What I've got, I worked for and deserve. What the other person has got he/she got by undeserved means'. Grace often brings protest. Grace negates self-justification. It offends our sense of 'earned righteousness'. In Matthew's early Christian community clearly some are assuming their rights and privileges as the 'first comers' and resenting those who are new.

As Boring above comments, “*the parable, while affirming the sovereign grace of God, rejects presuming on grace* [Commentary on Matthew, page 394].” Bailey quotes the 12th Century Arab Commentator on Scriptures, Ibn al-Tayyib: “*In the Gospel, salvation through Christ is open to both Simon who held the baby Jesus in the temple at the beginning of his life, and to the thief who believed at its end*” [page 362].

The parable is thus about the nature of God and the nature of grace. Given that God gives more than any of us deserve, grace extended to others never leaves us ‘short’. As an image of the generous God of grace who lets no sensible farm management dictate, this parable reminds me of a favourite quote of Presbyterian author David Redding in his book “Jesus Makes Me Laugh”: “*Someone is searching diligently for you. He is not a stationary God. He is crazy about you. The expense to which he has gone isn’t reasonable, is it? The cross was not a very dignified ransom. To say the least, it was a splurge of love and glory lavishly spent on you and me*” [Page 103].

Sound impossible? Refer back to verse 26 of the previous (linked) chapter.

THEMES: Grace, God’s nature.