

“For the Kingdom of Heaven is like this.....”

Just before Jesus told this parable of the vineyard, Matthew records how he had met with a rich young man, who asked how he could gain eternal life. Jesus told him to keep the commandments, and when the young man asked which one, Jesus listed five adding “You should love your neighbour as yourself”

‘I have kept all those’, he said, ‘ – (he was a good man) - ‘so what else must I do?’ ‘Go sell everything you have and give to the poor’ Jesus told him, ‘That way you have treasure in heaven – and then follow me’.

The young man went away sorrowful because he had many possessions. The disciples wondered if such a good man could not be part of the kingdom, how anyone could be saved. ‘Lord we have left everything for you – what will we get?’ Peter asked. ‘Everyone who has given up possessions for my sake, will receive a hundred times as much in return and will inherit eternal life’, Jesus told them but, ‘many who are first will be last, and the last will be first’. Put another way ‘those who seem least important now will be the greatest then’. And so he began his parable... ‘for the Kingdom of Heaven is like this...’

It was common especially at harvest time to see groups of people gathered in the marketplace hoping to be hired to work in the vineyards. The employer would pick those he needed and agree the day’s wage. Not so usual, this employer went back to hire others during the day and some for just the final hour. Those who were hired last were promised ‘whatever is right’ and when the time came for payment, the promise was kept, and they received a full wage. But that did *not* seem right to those who worked longer and expected to get more. They had, after all, put more effort in, given more of their time and energy and worked through the heat of the day. Like Peter’s question: ‘we have left everything’, they asked ‘We have given a whole day – what will we get for that?’

On one level we might sympathise with them: it doesn’t seem fair that those who worked so little received the same as those who had worked all day, even though it was what had been agreed. If we are honest, we might have joined in their protest. In human terms it does seem hard on those who gave more. Perhaps we might judge others as lazy or making no real effort to get work. But there is no suggestion in the parable that they were lazy. When the vineyard owner offered them the opportunity to work, they went immediately to join in. Or if we are in a position of employing others we might think this vineyard owner foolish because it would not take long for labourers to realise they need only work a short time and still get a full day’s wage. The parable does not make economic sense. But it was not meant to – because as Jesus had told them this was about the Kingdom of God in which there is no place for status or position, and possessions are irrelevant. Rather it is about our generous, gracious God, who wants everyone to be part of his kingdom.

Instead of thinking of the focus being on issues of fairness or even equality in reward, we might see it as an invitation to be part of the harvest, the opportunity of working in the vineyard a privilege and its reward a gift. ‘Or is it that are you envious because I am generous?’ asks the vineyard owner. The parable gives a glimpse of the nature of a kingdom that is characterised by inclusive generosity of love and forgiveness - and of persistence in working to bring everyone in. With God, there is no such thing as partial benefits or contractual rights. It is a relationship in which there is no limit to the love and grace he offers. and our worth does not depend on how many hours, days or even years we put in, nor what status, wealth, or title we gain in life, but simply on God’s love for us.

That’s what both the day-long workers in the parable and Jonah in our Old Testament reading struggled with. Jonah, sent by God to preach repentance to the people of Ninevah, resisted at first, but eventually was successful in his mission. But then far from being joyful, he complained it was not fair that these people should be forgiven. Although he admitted he knew God was a ‘gracious, merciful God slow to anger, and

abounding in steadfast love', he still struggled to accept that this generosity of forgiveness could be extended to such people. Just as the day-long workers in the parable struggled to accept the generosity of love that could be extended to those they judged deserved it least.

The concern of the owner, God's concern, was for something much deeper than fairness – it was about justice for all those who were left outside, those who lacked opportunity, those who might be regarded as least important and his desire and persistence in working to bring everyone in. Notice it was the owner himself who kept going back even until the last hour in order to bring in all those he found. God never stops searching, God never stops inviting us in. No one can say, 'It's too late for me with God', or 'I'm not important enough'. We might remember the thief who hung next to Jesus on the cross. His cry of faith as he died – Jesus remember me when you come into your kingdom - is what brought him home.

How many of us have discovered a sense of purpose to what we do much later than others seem to have done? How many of us find new opportunities to serve God when we had little expectation that this could be possible? Do we decline God's call because others are already working, or rejoice in the opportunity to join in? Do we complain because we have been working longer and others have only just begun, or do we rejoice with God that others have at last heard his call on their lives? This parable is about being called, collaborating with God's work, and discovering that is reward in itself, - something the apostle Paul often testified to in his ministry and mission.

And that question put to those all-day workers 'should I not also be concerned about them', becomes 'should **we too** not be concerned about those who God longs to bring in?' Do not dismiss those who are still waiting, for whatever reason, those who do not feel wanted, or needed, or loved – because they are the very ones God wants us to invite in – they are the ones God longs to have in his kingdom. They are the ones God wants us to care for, to love, and to keep on loving until they too find a place in the kingdom.

Today God invites each one of us to come and join in the work of his vineyard and promises 'I will give you what is right'. Joining is not about getting rich in this life but having the greatest treasure of riches in heaven. God's saving grace is offered to all, so let no-one think they are not wanted, or not needed. Because God needs us all – you and me - and by his grace alone, we will rejoice in the gift he longs to give - life in his eternal kingdom.

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