

Sunday 20 September 2020
A Sermon by the Rev James W. Aitchison
Based on a Reading from the Lectionary

Opening Prayer

Generous God, you come to us again and again,
no matter how late it is in the day
or in our lives. Calling to us, gathering us in,
you give us your good work to do,
daily bread, and boundless grace.

Increase in us a generous spirit
so that we may do your work with joy
alongside others whom you also love.

We celebrate your salvation not only in our lives,
but also in the lives of other people,
even those we had not imagined
would be included
in the kingdom you are bringing.

Align us with your ways
and help us receive your gift of justice and mercy
as good news.

In Jesus Christ we pray. **Amen.**

A Reading from Holy Scripture:

Matthew 20:1-16 The parable of the workers in the vineyard

'For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard. ² He agreed to pay them a denarius^[a] for the day and sent them into his vineyard.

³ 'About nine in the morning he went out and saw others standing in the market-place doing nothing. ⁴ He told them, "You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right." ⁵ So they went.

'He went out again about noon and about three in the afternoon and did the same thing. ⁶ About five in the afternoon he went out and found still others standing around. He asked them, "Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?"

⁷ "'Because no one has hired us," they answered.

'He said to them, "You also go and work in my vineyard."

⁸ 'When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, "Call the workers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and going on to the first."

⁹ 'The workers who were hired about five in the afternoon came and each received a denarius. ¹⁰ So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius. ¹¹ When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner. ¹² "These who were hired last worked only one hour," they said, "and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day."

¹³ 'But he answered one of them, "I am not being unfair to you, friend. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius? ¹⁴ Take your pay and go. I want to give the one who was hired last the same as I gave you. ¹⁵ Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?"

¹⁶ 'So the last will be first, and the first will be last.'

New International Version - UK (NIVUK)

Sermon

If we go back a few verses to Chapter 19 and verse 27, we see Peter asking Jesus a question, a question that probably every follower of Jesus has asked. Peter asks the question for himself and it seems, on behalf of the other Disciples.

'We have left everything to follow you! What then will there be for us?'

Or more crudely put, 'What's in it for us?'

Every Christian has probably asked this question at sometime in their life, and although it is an honest question, it is selfish one.

'If I give up things in my service for the Lord, what will I get in return?'

This question confronts the Christian every day but is often simply demonstrated in our attitude to the monetary Offerings we give on the Lord's Day or at other times.

We may well be tempted to ask ourselves, (in our minds of course we would not want anyone to know what we are thinking, not even God).

'If I give a sizeable offering, will I get something in return? Maybe I'll get a blessing, maybe healing, or I might even get that thing I've been hoping for.'

Do you see the danger in such a question? Of course you do.

Jesus assures Peter that when that time comes when God will put all things right, make all things as they were meant to be and The Son of Man, that is Jesus, is seen in His Glory, then every one of His true followers who have made sacrifices to follow Him, will receive far more than they have ever given up. But here is something amazing, the true disciple of Jesus does not sacrifice in order to gain, the motivation for giving is their love for Jesus. Making sacrifices in the service of the Lord is not to be thought of like an investment in stocks and shares, with the possibility of the return going down or up. If the thought of reward is what motivates a person to follow Jesus, then rather than being a loyal subject of the King, willing to sacrifice their very life in His service, such a person is a mercenary, only willing to follow whoever promises the greater reward.

¹⁶ 'So the last will be first, and the first will be last.'

When the time comes for Jesus to renew all things and to reveal the truth, there will be surprises in store for us. One of those surprises will be, that those whom everyone on earth thought would have a high place in Heaven, may well find themselves in a humbler place, and those who others thought might have a lower place in Heaven, will have the higher place. (Not that any of these positions in Heaven will cause any feelings of resentment or injustice, for such thoughts will not fill the Resurrected and glorified being. There will be no jealousy or any other sinful thoughts or attitudes for the Saints in Glory).

God sees the heart of every human being, He knows the true motivation, thoughts, faith, and love of those who profess to be disciples of Jesus, and therefore only He is able to judge accordingly.

To help Peter understand more of what it is to serve God, Jesus tells him and the other Disciples, the Parable of the workers in the vineyard.

'The Kingdom of Heaven is like this..'

Early in the morning a landowner goes to hire labourers and hires some for the usual daily wage; three hours later at about nine in the morning, he returns to the market place and sees others there waiting to find employment, and he hires some more to labour on his land. He returns to the market place at noon and at three in afternoon and on each occasion he hires more labourers, then as the working day is drawing to a close he returns at about five in the afternoon and with only one hour of the working day left, he hires more.

Now you will see from the text that when the landowner went to the market place at nine in the morning, he was not necessarily looking to hire more labourers, he had already hired enough earlier, it would seem that this landowner was a kind man and he was doing what he could to help out those who were less fortunate. It must have been not only tiring, but humiliating, to have stand all day in the market place under the searing heat of the sun in the hope that someone might hire your labour, so that you could earn some money to by bread for you and your family.

This landowner makes five trips to the market place and each time he hires labourers, did he really need those he hired late in the afternoon?

Well the working day has come to an end and the landowner tells his foreman to start paying the wages and to begin with those who were hired last and end with those who were hired first.

When those who were hired at five in the afternoon came forward each of them received, in the currency of the Roman Empire, a Denarius, the usual days wage.

Now those who were hired first were watching on, and probably began to rub their hands together in anticipation, for they had assumed that when their turn came to be paid they would receive far more than a Denarius. After all if the employer was willing to give a full days wage to those who had worked only an hour, how much more will he give those who have worked all day?

Well, when they too were given a Denarius, they were less than pleased and they grumbled; being aggrieved they whispered their complaints and criticism among themselves whilst knowing that they have no real ground for complaint, for they had received their dues.

There grumbling must have got louder or one of them was angry enough to challenge the landowner.

"These who were hired last worked only one hour," they said, "and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day."

Does that kind of envy seem familiar? It ought to, because it is commonplace in society and even within the Church. We will have heard it (and perhaps said it) 'He has not done as much as I have, why should he get the same reward?'

'Why should that newcomer get the same privileges?'

Back to the story:

In reply the landowner tells the grumbling worker, that he has not been unfair, he has paid what was agreed. Notice he addresses him as friend, he is not angry with him, in fact he seems very gentle and patient (he needn't have been, for clearly he was a powerful and influential man in society and the labourer was not).

'Did we not make an agreement? You were happy with the usual days wage. Take what belongs to you and go (in peace). I choose to give to those hired last the same amount as I give you.'

It is in the landowners gift to choose; he need not be compelled by the selfishness of some to pay less to those who have worked for a shorter time, after all their need was just as great, they too had families to feed.

The employer is a kind man and he knows that the daily wage was just enough to keep a worker and his family fed for a day, and possibly longer, but an hour's wage would hardly buy a loaf of bread, but the fact that these men were willing to work even only one hour, shows just how desperate they were.

These men had waited all day in the hope of being hired; they had stayed in the market place right up until near the end of the working day in the hope of making even a few 'Assarion' (An 'Assarion' was 1/16th of a Denarius). The landowner knew this, and so it seems he took them on out of kindness and then paid them enough to buy food enough for their family.

This story or parable is an illustration of God's wonderfully generous kindness and mercy.

Those who had worked all day, thought it unjust that the latecomers should be treated like them and be given the same wage; it almost seemed unimportant to them that they had earned enough to buy food, something you might have thought they would have rejoiced in.

It seems that the satisfaction of being able to provide food for themselves and their families was overshadowed by their jealousy at others receiving the same as them for doing less. These jealous workers did not appreciate the kindness of the employer, nor it seems did they care about their fellow labourers, could they not bring themselves to be happy for them? Could they not rejoice that there would be fewer hungry people that day and the next?

Those who had worked all day had agreed to the rate, they had made a contract, they honoured their part and the Employer honoured his, so it ought not to have concerned them what the employer chose to pay others, and after all, it was his money. But the thought that others were getting a better deal than them, really got under their skin; their very human skin.

Perhaps we would do well to reflect on those occasions when we have felt like this about others. 'Why are they getting the same as or more than me? It's not fair!'

We can justify such thoughts by claiming that we are outraged at the injustice, but often what we pass off as an injury to justice, is really jealousy, envy or anger that others are getting more than WE think they deserve and we are getting less than WE deserve.

Well, we see in this story how Jesus turned upside down the notions that we have about who is worthy and what they ought to receive, as if we are able to be the arbiters of such things.

Neither length of service nor prominence in the Lord's work, are what determines how God will reward His children, He is not our debtor, we do not make a contract with Him and try to hold Him to it, nay, we are all like those labourers in the story who were hired at the last

hour and have been given more than they could have hoped for. We are helpless recipients of God's loving, generosity and mercy.

Who would dare tell God He is not fair?

And to conclude in the words of the 17/18 Century English Presbyterian Minister, Matthew Henry;

'We forego every proud claim, and seek for salvation as a free gift. Let us never envy or grudge, but rejoice and praise God for HIS mercy to others, as well s to ourselves.'

Amen!

Prayers of Intercession

God of unending mercy and steadfast love,
we are grateful that you are slow to anger,
for there is much in this world that is wrong
and set against your purposes.

Overcome our many injustices with your justice;
overtake our lust for revenge with your great mercy.

We pray for nations locked in enmity
to be set free from old patterns
and to embrace a new way of relating.

We pray for people who wield economic power
to take notice of those whom you notice
and to have compassion for those who are vulnerable.

We pray for day labourers and the unemployed
and the homeless.

Inspire us who have enough to share what we have,
not in measured and resentful amounts,
but gladly, abundantly,
so basic needs do not go unattended.

Gather up the first and the last,
the least and the greatest,
in the common work of your kingdom,
until there is no more first or last at all,
for all are one in your name.

Help us all to see not only your grace at work in the world,
but also your work within us,
and the holy kindness that heals us
and help us see ourselves rightly.

We thank you for the privilege of believing in Christ,
of living in Christ,
and of living for Christ.

In all things, at all times,
we give thanks to you,
who never lets us go;
through Jesus Christ our Saviour. **Amen.**

Commemoration of the Faithful Departed

And now, Father, bring to our remembrance the unity of the
Church in heaven and on earth, fill us with the joy of the faithful
departed, and keep us faithful to you all the days of our service
here on earth; through Jesus Christ our Lord, Who taught us to
pray, when He said, 'Our Father...'

The Lord's Prayer

OUR Father which art in heaven,
Hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom come.
Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil:
For Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory,
For ever. Amen.

The Blessing

The Blessing of God Almighty, The Father, The Son and the Holy Spirit be upon you. Amen!