

## Sermon for 20th September 2020 Trinity 15

I read in my Saturday newspaper yesterday a small piece reporting that Lord Sugar is facing a backlash from Australians after apparently jumping the queue for flights to Sydney. This is about flights travelling from London to Sydney which are currently restricted and there are many Australians waiting to go home. They asked the question “Why does Lord Sugar get first class treatment, while tens of thousands of Australians get left behind? It’s one rule for the privileged few”. Oh dear, poor Lord Sugar - I rather like him actually, he always seems rather sensible but I guess when you are rich and famous and presumably he and others like him are good for business generally, they will be able to jump to the head of the queue!

You can just hear the cry can’t you “Its not fair!” No, life isn’t fair often. And today’s parable illustrates this cry of unfairness by the workers who have worked long and hard in the heat of the sun all day in the vineyard. This is quite a strange parable but is one of the most important parables that Jesus ever told. It goes like this:

It begins and revolves around two kinds of people. The first is a landowner, or more specifically the owner of a vineyard. As is true today, so also in the first century, if you own a vineyard, you are probably doing pretty well in life. The other character or characters, are the day labourers and they live right at the opposite end of the economic ladder. Day labourers are people who don’t have a regular job. They go into the town each morning hoping they will find some work so they can feed their family. They are not beggars, they are not destitute, but they I guess live right on the edge of subsistence and poverty.

When the parable starts the owner of a vineyard needs some help. It’s likely harvest time and the work is plentiful, so he goes into town as soon as the sun comes up to hire some additional workers agreeing to pay them a daily wage of one denarius, about the amount it takes to feed a family for a day. As the day goes on, it turns out that the landowner needs more help so he goes out at about 9 in the morning and tells some more labourers that if they work, he’ll pay them what is right. No amount is named, just a promise that he will do right by them. And then he goes out again at noon, and then once more at 3pm and finally for the last time at 5pm, which seems strange because there is only one more hour left in the twelve hour day. But he hires them and sends them into the vineyard.

And then at 6pm in the evening, he tells his manager to settle accounts and the workers who came last and worked only one hour are paid first. And when they show up, I imagine they are astounded that they received a full days wage. Incredible! They worked just one hour - about 8 and a half % of

the days work but they are getting a 100% of a full day's wage. They are not just surprised but overjoyed!

And so then perhaps the only people happier than those hired at the last hour are those hired at the first. Think about it. They worked twelve hours and just saw the guys who only worked one hour get a full day's wage. So they may well be thinking that they will also get paid more, a lot more. But when they show up to get paid, they also get a single denarius. And that doesn't seem fair - after all they have worked a lot harder and so they understandably grumble. We would all agree that in this context they deserve more. Its all a bit bizarre!

So what does the landowner say to them when they complain? "Friend, I am doing you no wrong, I'm paying you exactly what we agreed to. If I want to pay someone else more, what is that to you?" He then questions their motives, even their character 'or are you envious because I am generous?' Okay, he's right I guess, but it still seems a bit hard doesn't it to those who have put in all that work. Don't they deserve more? Are they not entitled to more? A difficult word 'entitlement' in God's kingdom because there is no 'entitlement' in God's kingdom. We cannot earn a place in his kingdom. It is through God's invitation that we can enter it and of course we can decline it.

In our own lives it's easy to develop a sense of entitlement, based on how involved we have been in church life, or how generous we have been with our time, talents and money. And then people who have done nothing for God all their lives, who have perhaps wasted their lives, come along at the eleventh hour and get an equal blessing. I have been in situations where I have been envious of others doing what I would like to be doing and feeling somewhat passed by. That's not fair, I have thought. Never the less we need to understand that we will all receive an equal blessing and in God's good time something will be made of all our lives. That's right - in God's time, not our idea of timing! In fact I would say that much of life is spent in waiting, being patient, letting God set the agenda and the speed of events. Every dog has their day as they say! We can apply this sense of entitlement to any other relevant part of our lives, not just church.

So entry to the Kingdom is at God's invitation and so we see in the parable that the hiring of all the workers throughout the day was done by the landowner himself, not by any intermediary. At Calvary the criminal crucified with Jesus was not deserving of anything, but of Jesus he made a simple request: "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." To which Jesus replied, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise". And so a criminal was the first to enter God's kingdom, with God's grace and with an equal blessing with all would follow him.

And so if you haven't realised before this parable is of course about the kingdom. The parable is not a parable about this world as it is. This is about how God wants the world to be, where everyone is treated the same, despite what they've given or have. In God's kingdom everyone is given the same dignity, respect and reward. Notice how this landowner refers to the complainants as 'friend', he lets them speak and he answers, but before he makes his case he calls them 'friend'.

We also don't know at the end of the day why those last workers weren't hired earlier. Did they struggle with some disability or disease; was there something else about them which didn't make them an attractive worker. We don't know. And this landowner doesn't care. When he sees they are available he just hires them and pays them what everyone else gets. It's not fair; it's more than fair! It's downright generous and that is what God's kingdom is all about. And so this parable is about God's love for all, justice and generosity for all and demonstrates just how it surpasses, transcends and subverts our human notions of love, justice and generosity. When we receive something that is way beyond our expectations and perhaps way beyond what we think we deserve, surely our gratitude will surely flow, just as the words of the psalm we said today. So too then because of God's wonderful grace, we should all feel like those workers hired last and be filled with gratitude and thanksgiving that God has chosen us at all.

Amen.