

## **ST AIDAN'S UNITING CHURCH**

**SUNDAY 21 SEPTEMBER 2008**

**Rev. Graham McAnalley**

**Matthew 20: 1-15**

### **“Eccentricity or Compassion?”**

Why would you pay more than you have to? That's quite odd. It's not the way things work. The general desire of most people is to pay less than they might be expected to pay. Supermarkets offer us 4c a litre off the price of petrol if we shop with them. We are bombarded with advertisements offering us the specials of the week, or interest-free terms for larger items, or special discount prices on this or that. Most people want to pay less for what they get. Why pay more?

Well, that's a good question, isn't it? And yet that is exactly what the landowner in this morning's parable did. He paid a number of hired labourers more, in some cases much more, than the wages to which they were entitled. What was his motivation? And what's this story of an eccentric landowner doing in our Scriptures?

One of the problems with the parables of Jesus is that we have heard them, and have heard them preached on, so often that we have become too familiar with them. We know them so well that the element of surprise in them is no longer there for us. The sting in their tail has been removed by familiarity.

Another problem with the parables is that they belong to a very different cultural and social world from the one in which we live. To really understand them we have to try to imagine ourselves back in 1<sup>st</sup> century Galilee and Judea.

A third problem, I believe, is that an interpretation has often been read back into the parables from later Christian beliefs and understandings. While that may sometimes be helpful, it can obscure the original meaning and intention of a parable, and perhaps therefore, its message for us today. The parables were addressed, in the first instance, to contemporaries of Jesus and they had to have meaning for them in the world in which they lived.

I think this morning's parable is a good example of that third problem. The unbelievable thing about this story is the landowner paying all his hired workers the same wages irrespective of whether they have worked a full twelve hour day, nine hours, six hours, three hours, or even one hour! Why would he do such a thing?

The traditional or most common interpretation of this parable has seen the landowner's eccentric generosity as an image of God's grace. God's grace is undeserved – God treats us all as equals, whether we have been more faithful or less faithful, whether we have spent a lifetime as Christian disciples or are Johnnies-come-lately to faith, whether we have lived good moral lives or played fast and loose with the moral code. God's not into fairness! FAIRNESS - that's what upset the labourers who had worked all day picking grapes: others, who had worked much shorter hours, were paid the same as they were. It wasn't so much that those who were hired at the beginning of the day thought that they were treated unfairly – they received what they had agreed to work for – it was that the others were treated so generously.

That's grace! Grace cannot be earned or deserved. Read this way the parable can be seen as commentary on that oft-quoted verse from the Letter to the Ephesians:

*For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God – not the result of works, so that no one may boast.*

Now, that may all be true, but was it what Jesus intended when he told this parable?

More recently some scholars have suggested a very different interpretation. They begin by asking, how would the peasants who first heard the parable have thought about the landowner? Would they have seen his behaviour as pointing to the nature of God, or would they have heard the parable as an indictment of how wealthy landowners behave?

One scholar suggests that, on hearing the parable, the peasant audience may have thought: "These wealthy landowners get our land" – often by foreclosure on debt – "and turn us into tenant farmers and day labourers. Then they try to harvest their crop with as few workers as possible, which is why they don't hire more workers in the morning. When, later in the day, they find they need more workers, they accuse those who have not been hired yet of being lazy." (In the parable, you'll recall, the landowner says to those he hires late in the day, "Why are you standing here idle all day?" The suggestion is that the words carry the implication that it is the labourers' own fault that they aren't working.) "Then," to continue the thought of the peasant audience, "they pay everyone the same wage, barely enough for survival, and expect to be seen as good-hearted, generous people."

[I am indebted to Marcus Borg, in his book 'Jesus: Uncovering the life, teaching and relevance of a religious revolutionary' for this summary of a different interpretation of the parable.]

I find it helpful that this interpretation calls our attention to the domination system under which the peasants, the vast majority of the population, lived: but I find this interpretation unconvincing for three reasons:

- The parable is introduced with the words "the kingdom of God is like a landowner"; but in this interpretation the landowner is anything but an image of the kingdom of God.
- I also think the implication read into the landowner's comment about labourers standing idle all day, is a bit stretched. I don't think the words necessarily carry that implication.
- Finally, I think it very much out of character for a wealthy landowner, whose wealth was acquired at the expense of the peasants, to be paying them more than was absolutely necessary or to be concerned that his hired hands should think of him as good-hearted and generous.

So let's have another look at the parable.

According to the text, this story is a parable of the kingdom of God, and it is the action of the landowner that points to how things will be in that kingdom. The clue to understanding the parable, therefore, lies in the unexpected and eccentric behaviour of the landowner, who pays those who have worked lesser hours a full day's wage. This stands in stark contrast to the domination system of the day under which landless peasants were exploited mercilessly in further increasing the wealth of the wealthy. So why would a wealthy landowner act out of character and over-pay those of his workers who had done less than a full day's work?

A denarius was the usual daily wage for a day labourer – the basic wage, if you like – and it was very basic. It was a struggle to make ends meet on it. Those who were not hired at the beginning of a day

did not know whether they would find any work at all that day. If they didn't, there was no money to take home; and if they did, what wages they took home would be far less than they needed to put food on the family table. They and their families lived a hand-to-mouth existence when they were fully employed; there was no money for luxuries or to put away for a rainy day. If they didn't work, life was indeed grim.

A landowner knew this, of course, although he had almost certainly never experienced it. This particular landowner is obviously a man of compassion. He doesn't want to see wives and children suffering because the breadwinner is less than fully employed, and so he pays all his grape pickers a denarius each, whether they have earned it or not. He doesn't overpay those who are fully employed, but he pays the others what they need to keep body and soul together. And this, says Jesus, is a picture of the kingdom of God.

In that kingdom – in the world as God wants it to be – in the world for which we should be striving - there will be no have-nots. All will be cared for. All will have enough to eat and live with dignity.

This surely says something to us about the society and the world in which we live. We live in a society in which the poor are getting poorer and the rich are getting richer, as a report released this week from the Catholic Church makes abundantly clear. We are part of a world in which some have, not only more than they need, but too much, while many others have far too little: for them life is a daily struggle to survive, and many do not survive.

This is not the world as God intends it to be. The people of the world, God's children, should be able to live with dignity, free from the fear of hunger, lack of adequate shelter, exploitation and oppression. The world, if it were the kingdom of God, would not know the extremes of wealth and poverty, freedom and oppression that our world does know.

The kingdom which Jesus proclaimed will not come by some cataclysmic event in which God rights the wrongs of this world. It will come when those who follow Jesus, and others of goodwill, take seriously the challenge to live the life of the kingdom, and to work for the coming of that kingdom, in the here and now.

We can do that, if we will, by living compassionately and sharing some of our wealth with the desperately needy of our society and our world. We, who are privileged to live in a democracy, can also do that by agitating for government policies, both national and international, that address the problems of poverty and all that poverty breeds. We can do it by our support of those who, whether in the name of Christ or not, whether knowingly or not, work towards his vision of God's kingdom.

Then we shall not only pray, "Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth....," we shall ourselves be part of the answer to that prayer.