

SUNDAY REFLECTIONS

Sunday 20 September 2020 | The Fifteenth Sunday after Trinity

TODAY'S READINGS

Jonah 3.10-4.11 | Psalm 145.1-8 | Philippians 1.21-30 | Matthew 20.1-16



'Parable of the Labourers in the Vineyard' (1637)
by Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn (1606-1669)

✚ In the name of God,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

For as long as I can remember I've always been committed to trying my best - particularly at school, or when faced with a difficult challenge or choice. The encouragement I received from my parents, from my teachers, from those around me has always been that effort is far more important than achievement. I can remember in my secondary school reports where two columns of grades for each subject: one for effort, the other for attainment, and the words of my form tutor every time it came for the reports to be handed out reminding us all, that the grades for effort, rather than our academic success, revealed something more about our true character and attitude to learning. We might not all be able to excel at everything, but we can all put the work in - that somehow if we keep trying then it's right that we'll be rewarded. Hence, I'll admit to always being rather annoyed with those who could seemingly not do any work at all and yet sail through tests and assessments with relative ease.

It's an attitude to life, I've carried with me ever since, through years at university, at theological college, and indeed into ministry, trusting that despite the outcome, what matters most is the attitude with which we approach those things asked of us; especially when I don't feel particularly equipped or enabled for the task being asked of me. I've found that doing so, being aware of my perceived weakness, has focused in my mind and heart a more acute awareness of my dependence on God for strength and support; that his help is ever present and is needed in all things if we are to fulfil what he asks of us. This doesn't always come easily, but it does come through patient prayer and an openness to where the Spirit is at work, so often in the most unlikely places.

The parable that Jesus tells in today's gospel reading however, rather challenges this attitude of trying one's best, of putting the work in, as we hear of a landowner who adopts a rather different attitude in ensuring that his vineyard is cared and tended for, as he seeks labourers at five different times of the day to work the land that he wants to cultivate. There is plenty to do and as the days go on he discovers that he needs more and more people to help the collective effort; no one is turned away but rather all are invited and are assured that when evening comes they will receive what is owed for their efforts. Those who have worked longest will surely receive a greater reward, (the average daily wage being one denarius), than those who arriving at five o'clock in the afternoon have only been out in the vineyard for an hour.

Surely that's how the world works? How society functions? How human beings can be expected to be treated? With respect and understanding, but also with a due regard for what they've put into

something. That somehow those who've worked harder will receive more, each receiving what's rightly deserved. If God is loving and just then he must accept commercial convention, and his promised Kingdom and the blessings it gives will be commensurate with the service we've offered to him.

To put the parable in context for a moment, we must remember that when Jesus refers to those called to work in the landowner's vineyard, he's referring to day labourers - individuals who would go out every morning in search of employment and would be paid each evening after a hard day's work. These are people with no fixed status or security, no rights, no money apart that which they managed to earn by being eager in finding it. All of those who labour in the vineyard, whatever hour of the day they were called to work, are thus in a similar position of need. Thus, we can imagine that those hired towards the close of the day initially probably quite aggrieved that, in line with normal practice, they would receive less than those who managed to secure their work first thing.

It's likely too that Jesus' reference to a vineyard in the parable is purposefully deliberate, drawing upon the prophetic tradition, such as in Isaiah¹, where the vineyard of the Lord is compared to the house of Israel. In this, the story is consciously a parable that reflects upon the people of God, and hence for the gospel's audience and for us today, all these years later, a parable for the church. Moreover, since the parable is only found in Matthew's gospel, and follows on from Peter's desire to know more of what's in it for the disciples if they follow Jesus faithfully, we can deduce that the parable's message is not simply one that we need to hear, but one that goes to the heart of what it means to be a follower of Christ.

As we discover, this discipleship, our willingness to accept the Lord's call, is one that as the parable unfolds is dependent on two fundamental truths. First, the overwhelming generosity of God and second, an awareness that in the kingdom of heaven our human expectations will not only be provoked but completely overturned. Regardless of our expectations the parable forces us to confront the stinging truth, that with God, harder work does not deserve greater payment. Though we might sympathise with the workers who at the end of the day complain that their hours of toil deserves more than the usual daily wage, since it's what we would expect for ourselves, in the end their reward is the same as all those who have laboured together, for whatever length of time in the landowner's vineyard.

¹ Isaiah 5.7: *'For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the people of Judah are his pleasant planting; he expected justice, but saw bloodshed; righteousness, but heard a cry!'*

It is all rather shocking, the God whom Jesus reveals rules by grace, we do not lose out because God has been equally generous to those whom we think are undeserving. It is not for us to decide or determine, to judge or criticise, to lament or complain. In the kingdom of God in which the first are last and the last first, there is no room for envious comparisons.² As the landowner says to the aggrieved labourers: *'Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?'*

A reminder that such actions of utter generosity have upset nothing more than what we, from rather worldly perspective, might presume is right or wrong. The truth is God's mercy is inexhaustible, but its a reality, Jesus says, that we can find it hard to accept; and yet is essential if we are to glimpse what it means to share and reveal the good news of the kingdom.

The parable telling us that we are called to live not in such a way that we believe we can earn God's favour, but rather in response to the grace we know ourselves to have received, regardless of whether we think ourselves deserving of it or not. A grace that disturbs and challenges us as we seek to live faithfully in step with the revelation of God's love lived out in Jesus Christ - seen ultimately upon the cross and vindicated by his resurrection and rising from the dead.

This means not only a coming to terms with, an owning up to, the narrowness and shallowness of our views when it comes to judging others, to any attitudes of fault-finding and condemnation that only obscures us from what the Lord has done and is still doing. But much more assuredly it serves as a prompt, an encouragement of our own desire to follow in Jesus the God of justice and compassion, whose grace is sufficient for every need, and whose blessing extends to all.

‡ In the name of God,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

² R.T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew* (NICNT), Grand Rapids: Michigan, p 748.

The Collect
for The Fifteenth Sunday after Trinity

**God, who in generous mercy sent the Holy Spirit
upon your Church in the burning fire of your love:
grant that your people may be fervent
in the fellowship of the gospel
that, always abiding in you,
they may be found steadfast in faith and active in service;
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever. Amen.**

Old Testament Reading

When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it.

But this was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry. He prayed to the Lord and said, 'O Lord! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing. And now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.' And the Lord said, 'Is it right for you to be angry?' Then Jonah went out of the city and sat down east of the city, and made a booth for himself there. He sat under it in the shade, waiting to see what would become of the city.

The Lord God appointed a bush, and made it come up over Jonah, to give shade over his head, to save him from his discomfort; so Jonah was very happy about the bush. But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the bush, so that it withered. When the sun rose, God prepared a sultry east wind, and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint and asked that he might die. He said, 'It is better for me to die than to live.'

But God said to Jonah, 'Is it right for you to be angry about the bush?' And he said, 'Yes, angry enough to die.' Then the Lord said, 'You are concerned about the bush, for which you did not

labour and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night. And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?’

Jonah 3.10-4.11

Gospel Reading

Jesus said to the disciples, ‘For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire labourers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the labourers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. When he went out about nine o’clock, he saw others standing idle in the market-place; and he said to them, “You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.” So they went. When he went out again about noon and about three o’clock, he did the same. And about five o’clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, “Why are you standing here idle all day?” They said to him, “Because no one has hired us.” He said to them, “You also go into the vineyard.”

When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, “Call the labourers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.” When those hired about five o’clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, saying, “These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.” But he replied to one of them, “Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?” So the last will be first, and the first will be last.’

Matthew 20.1-16

Prayers of Intercession

- ▶ for the Church of God throughout the world - for its peace and unity and all who seek to bear witness to the good news of Christ;
- ▶ for the world which Christ has redeemed, particularly for the peoples of the Yemen, Lebanon and the wider Middle East, for an end to bitterness, hatred and suffering;
- ▶ for those who struggle with feelings of bitterness and resentment, that they may know the grace of God;
- ▶ for those who are isolated, alone or afraid, that they might find reassurance and comfort in the presence of God;
- ▶ for those struggling to find hope, for whom the way ahead is difficult;
- ▶ for the strength and the will to forgive as we have been forgiven by Christ;
- ▶ for all whom we love and care for, remembering those who have no-one to pray for them;
- ▶ for our communities, that together we might know the love of Jesus;
- ▶ for all who are sick or suffering, those known to us and those known to God alone, that they may know Christ's healing and wholeness in body, mind and spirit;
- ▶ for the departed, and all who mourn and grieve the loss of loved ones, that we may know the hope and comfort of Christ who is the resurrection and the life;
- ▶ for glimpses of God's grace in the week ahead, that we might be renewed in faith, and so be enabled to share with others the gift of Christ's peace.

We remember in pray also those to be ordained in the Diocese this Michaelmas, that they may know the Lord's strength to hear afresh his call as they prepare for the duties and joys of ordained ministry.

To be ordained Deacon by the Bishop of Carlisle at Carlisle Cathedral on Saturday 26 September:

- Victoria Sekasi to serve Two Valleys Mission Community
- Lawrence Basham to serve Keswick Mission Community
- Nina Orchard to serve Two Rivers Mission Community
- Andrew Callaway to serve Solway Plain Mission Community
- Jane Natrass to serve Central Lakes Mission Community
- Duncan Jackson to serve the Benefice of Egremont and Haile
- Gill Davidson to serve Cockermouth Team Area Mission Community

To be ordained Priest at services in their benefices in the coming weeks:

- Madeline Simpson to serve the Benefice of Ulverston
- Craig Bentley to serve the Benefice of Natland and the Benefice of Old and New Hutton
- Fran Parkinson to serve the Benefice of High Westmorland
- Peter Dixon to serve the Benefice of Holme Eden and Wetheral
- Duncan Jackson to serve the Benefice of Egremont and Haile

THE SUNDAY SUPPLEMENT

KENT ESTUARY MISSION COMMUNITY PRAYER MEETINGS

<https://bit.ly/KEMCPrayer>

The next next prayer gathering for the church communities of the Kent Estuary Mission Community will be on **Tuesday 22 September at 10.30am** (led and coordinated by Arnside Methodist Church). It is hoped that these gatherings will serve to strengthen our common faith and shared fellowship across the Kent Estuary as we look ahead to working together as church communities into the future.

EXPLORING VOCATIONS

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vmqcI6kaqkc>

Earlier this week the Diocese held an 'Exploring Vocations' evening on line, reflecting on the various ministries and vocations that are needed and encouraged within the life of the church. It was an opportunity to hear encouraging stories that have emerged over recent months and to prompt us to consider what God might be calling each of us to as we look to the future. You can watch the evening's presentations and discussions using the YouTube link above.



CARLISLE DIOCESAN HARVEST APPEAL

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SmI48TEF3Q4>

The Bishop of Carlisle's Harvest Appeal has been launched online, it can be viewed on YouTube using the link above.

CHURCH OF ENGLAND RESOURCES

<https://www.churchofengland.org/>

<https://soundcloud.com/the-church-of-england>

<https://www.churchofengland.org/prayer-and-worship/join-us-service-daily-prayer>

<https://www.youtube.com/thechurchofengland>



The Church of England Service this week takes the theme of 'Everyone is made in the image of God' and celebrates the gifts of Christians with disabilities. The service can be found online here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mozb3vjEUiw>

DAILY HOPE PHONE LINE

The Church of England has developed a national **free** phone line to help support those who might feel particularly isolated at this time, especially if they have no access to the internet. The phone number is **0800 804 8044** and provides a collection of readings, prayers and hymns that can be listened to, all of which are updated regularly. If you know of anyone who might appreciate this service, please do let them know the phone number and pray that it will be a blessing to many.

