

Sunday 20 September – Sixteenth Sunday after Trinity

Sermon by Harold Toms

An audio recording of the sermon from St Luke's will be available after the service at [Sermons \(tk-tiptree-braxted-benefice.org.uk\)](http://Sermons(tk-tiptree-braxted-benefice.org.uk)

I wonder if, as I read the Gospel reading for this morning, you felt a growing sense of injustice as the story unfolded. Can it be right that those who worked all day receive the same pay as those who work for only one hour? Like all of the Kingdom Parables the story in Matthew 20 has to be described as something of a mystery. Whenever Jesus uses the words “For the kingdom of heaven is like...” we find what follows can be hard for us to understand and there is a temptation to try and explain the saying as some sort of allegory.

In the case of this story of a landowner or farmer who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard a number of allegorical meanings might suggest themselves to us. The parable is not a social comment about work. Some commentators have suggested that the workers are rewarded equally because the men who worked for an hour did as much as those who worked all day. The parable certainly doesn't say that. Nor is the parable an affirmation about intentions. The workers who worked an hour were willing to work all day and so were paid the full day's pay. Again, the parable doesn't say this. Some suggest that the parable is about outcasts, who are accepted into God's family, but who face the grumbling of the righteous at their free inclusion; an idea found in the parable of the Prodigal Son. Others suggest that it depicts the Jew/Gentile debate. The Jews have borne the burden of the Law and now Gentile outcasts are made equal to them apart from the Law. Neither is it saying all Christians are equal before God or that the work of all believers is equal before God; all ministries are equal in His sight.

But enough of what the parable is not about, what then is its message? As with all kingdom parables, the central truth of this parable concerns the immediacy of the kingdom of God. The parable proclaims the gospel; it reminds us that now is the eleventh hour, the time of reckoning. Know this for sure, the kingdom of God is at hand, so repent and believe. As we face this reckoning, we become aware that things are not reckoned, as we would expect. The blessings of the dawning kingdom are gained, not by works, but as a gift of God's grace freely given. As the landowner gives the

day's pay to all he hires irrespective of the work undertaken, so God gives the blessing of inclusion in the kingdom apart from works. This is an amazing truth, and quite unexpected. The principle of the world is that the one who works the longest receives the most pay. That is just. But in the kingdom of God the principles of merit and ability may be set aside so that grace can prevail.

So why was Jesus teaching this message? To understand this we need to consider the context of the parable and in particular the passage that immediately precedes it. This is the story of the rich young man who came to Jesus with the question "... what good deed must I do to have eternal life?" He thought he could "get eternal life" by obedience to the Law. Jesus had to show him that the obedience necessary to gain eternal life was the obedience of perfection. "Sell all your possessions and give to the poor." The young man was right to go "away sad", for who can achieve such perfection. The disciples were also right to be concerned when the full weight of Jesus' words sank in. "Who then can be saved?" Peter asks. Like the rich young man, we all have possessions and we are all tied to them. The answer is "with people this (the gaining of eternal life) is impossible, but with God all things are possible".

We must not be fooled by our own assessment of our standing before God. In his presence, all our worthiness is of little value. The only thing of worth is God's generous kindness, his forgiveness and acceptance freely given to those who seek it in Christ Jesus. And we shouldn't understate the value of this grace because it is freely given; it is not "cheap grace" because we are not the ones to pay the price. When we think about what Jesus said to the rich young man, that he must "Sell all (his) possessions and give to the poor." Jesus is actually talking about what he has done for us. He is the one who gave up the throne of heaven, a greater richness than can be imagined, and gave all that he had, even his life to give to the poor. Because, be in no doubt, whatever we think our worthiness is, before God it is as nothing, we are all "the poor".

I am sure that it is this parable that Paul had in mind when he wrote those well-known words, seen on many a church noticeboard:

"For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."

When we consider the message from today's Gospel reading it is surely this: now is the time to act, now is the time to make our preparation for the time of reckoning. It is never too late until the hour has actually come. Some started their labour in the vineyard in the morning, some in the afternoon, and some just an hour before the end of the day. All received their reward, but any that did no labour at all, received nothing, those who merit no mention in the story are the ones who were never in the marketplace ready to be hired. If we go out of this building today without a further thought about the Gospel perhaps that will be our story, never working even for that final hour in the Lord's vineyard. I think also we should consider what the story of Jonah, paired with this Gospel reading, tells us. Jonah seems positively to hate the idea of God's forgiveness for others. Do we perhaps tend to agree with Jonah in thinking that God is cheapening forgiveness, even encouraging wrong-doing? We live in a society obsessed with ideas about justice and rights. But maybe we need to let go of such language and instead speak the language of "covenant" and "forgiveness". For, if God can bear to filter His justice through the lens of mercy, who are we to forget how much we have been forgiven, and demand harsh "justice" for others?

Amen.