



Preach **Matthew** sermon

(Year A Proper 20)

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Ps 145:1-8
Phil 1:21-30

CONTINUOUS

Ex 16:2-15
Ps 105:1-6,37-45
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Matthew 20:1-16 (NIV) Parable of the Labourers in the Vineyard

“For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire men to work in his vineyard. He agreed to pay them a denarius for the day and sent them into his vineyard.

“About the third hour he went out and saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing. He told them, ‘You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.’ So they went.

“He went out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour and did the same thing. About the eleventh hour he went out and found still others standing around. He asked them, ‘Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?’

“‘Because no one has hired us,’ they answered.

“He said to them, ‘You also go and work in my vineyard.’

“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.’

“The workers who were hired about the eleventh hour came and each received a denarius. So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius. When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner. ‘These men 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.’

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

“So the last will be first, and the first will be last,”

We do like a good scandal - whether it’s about footballers, or fat cats - there is always some one that we think earns too much money for too little work! Often our indignation is all the greater because we are paying, either through inflated football match tickets or high bills or charges! But here it isn’t costing the first labourers anything - they are still getting a good wage, and they have not had the worry of how to put to food in their families mouths during the day. But their annoyance is not that they are being badly treated, it is that others get what in their eyes they don’t deserve - they begrudge such generosity!

The key issue here is contentment. The Gospel challenge is to learn to be content with what we have been blessed with, not constantly looking over our shoulder at what others have! Our measure is not to be the worlds but Gods! If discontent and envy was an issue 2000 years ago then think how big an issue it is now with the power of advertising that tells us what we should own, or the promise of easy money to get what we want - now, or comparison with those who appear to have and be more than we are? The Keith Tondue quotation rings so true - “people use money they don’t have, to buy things they don’t need, to impress people they don’t like!”

It’s a question of perspective. If we look at a beautiful piece of embroidery it does have two sides - we can either see the pattern on the top or the chaos underneath. For some there is a pattern of grace that is reflected in contentment, for others there is the disorder of unfulfilled material desires. There will always be more to spend our money on than we can afford. There will always be people with more money than us - including those we don’t believe deserve it - even though we know we are not meant to be judgmental!



There is, of course, no virtue in poverty itself and the parable cannot be used to reinforce the right of those in power to do what they please with their money. Within the parable there is negotiation with the workers, a fair wage agreed, the creation of employment and both part time and full time workers receive sufficient to care for their families despite their different contributions.

It is the same with us, we cannot all be high earning businessmen, and we cannot all work fulltime. We cannot demand equal treatment in the world which judges us, and to some extent rewards us in a very unfair marketplace. But these workers were told to work in a vineyard, a metaphor for Israel's relationship with God and God's Kingdom. We too are called to work in and for the Kingdom. Some of this work is in church, as servers, side's persons; flower arrangers, and others. Some of this work is in our families and with our friends, in our communities - and here is the big challenge for the church - to be a real presence of and for the kingdom here in our work and witness. Finally for some of us it is in our employment - however lowly or underpaid, or undervalued. In these circumstances it is hard to show generosity of grace and not to be looking over our shoulders at those who receive high rewards for their labour. But in God's eyes we are all loved and valued beyond measure, and in His kingdom all are treated with generosity no matter how little they are able to contribute in the labour of the kingdom. There is no benefit in looking at anyone else's blessings we should be too busy thanking God for our own!

In the last of CS Lewis books on Narnia, "The last Battle" the dwarves have a feast set in front of them that they refuse to see eating dirt instead. They refuse to acknowledge all the blessings of heaven and therefore exclude themselves from Heaven by the narrowness of their mean spirited vision. We too run this risk, self-exclusion from the Kingdom results from adopting a miserly, covetous spirit that cannot rejoice in generosity and knows no contentment only envy.

This parable is told about money for a good reason. Somehow money is one of the raw nerves of life which, when touched, sparks the most profound reaction. It has been said to be a thermometer of faith, but it also shows the level of our trust, contentment and grace. It is possible to feign, even to ourselves, the depth of our faith in our service in church, our good works, our knowledge or leadership role. But our giving exposes us as we really are.

For those of us who are leaders in the church one of the key elements in the parable is the employer's claim to freedom as to how to spend his money, "am I not free to do what I will with my money". Money can give us both freedom and choice, pretty much in proportion to how much we have. What money cannot do is guarantee the quality of the choices we make. The freedom of this employer is expressed in his choice to be generous. Would the early workers in the vineyard have made the same choice? The challenge to mature Christians is to move beyond calculating what we give and discovering a new and deepening spirit of generosity which Jesus teaches lies at the heart of kingdom life.

For those of us regular worshippers the issue is contentment. "I have learned", says St Paul in Corinthians, "to be content in both plenty and scarcity". Before we can know how much to give we have to know how much we need to live. Without contentment we will always be seeking more and that is not fertile ground to grow generosity. Discontent is like a river periodically bursting its banks and flooding the land around it. We need to establish the channels. The discipline of setting aside an amount we wish to give to God's work through his church at the





beginning of the week or month is an effective discipline. When we discipline ourselves to giving as a priority it revolutionises our self-understanding by putting God first. Before we seek for ourselves we exercise a grateful generosity in giving. It is a reminder of who is, or should be, at the centre.

For those here who join us each month or season, Charles Swindoll tells the story of a GI in London in the later days of the war. A young boy watched wistfully as he went into a baker to buy a pile of doughnuts. On leaving, and seeing the ragged, hungry child the GI asked if he also would like some doughnuts - and gave him a dozen. As he walked away he felt a tug at his greatcoat - it was the young boy; "Hey mister, are you God"? In nothing are we so much reflecting the nature of God as when we learn to be generous. The hardest and most rewarding area in which we can learn to be generous is with our money. Making simple definite decision to give regularly from the first of what we have is to make a decision to be a little like God.

Wherever we are with God, our lives can reflect his nature in the area of money and its use to show his love, and our thanks, in order that others can experience his love and give thanks themselves. There will always others both earlier and later in the Vineyard helping with the harvest. We rejoice at God's open invitation to all, and generosity to all regardless of the world's view of someone's worth, because to him we are infinitely precious and beyond price!

Amen

