

The Church's prayer for this Sunday – The fifteenth Sunday after Trinity

Lord God,
defend your Church from all false teaching
and give to your people knowledge of your truth,
that we may enjoy eternal life
in Jesus Christ our Lord.

Bible readings and reflection for Sunday 20th September 2020, the fifteenth Sunday after Trinity

Psalm 145: 1-8

**The Greatness and the Goodness of God
Praise. Of David.**

- ¹ I will extol you, my God and King,
and bless your name for ever and ever.
- ² Every day I will bless you,
and praise your name for ever and ever.
- ³ Great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised;
his greatness is unsearchable.
- ⁴ One generation shall laud your works to another,
and shall declare your mighty acts.
- ⁵ On the glorious splendour of your majesty,
and on your wondrous works, I will meditate.
- ⁶ The might of your awesome deeds shall be proclaimed,
and I will declare your greatness.
- ⁷ They shall celebrate the fame of your abundant goodness,
and shall sing aloud of your righteousness.
- ⁸ The Lord is gracious and merciful,
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

**Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit. As it was in the beginning is
now and shall be for ever. Amen.**

Today's reading from the Old Testament: Jonah 3: 10 - 4:11

¹⁰When 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.

Jonah's Anger

⁴ But this was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry. ² 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. ³ And now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.' ⁴ And the Lord said, 'Is it right for you to be angry?' ⁵ 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.

⁶ 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. ⁷ But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the bush, so that it withered. ⁸ 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.'

Jonah Is Reproved

⁹ But God said to Jonah, 'Is it right for you to be angry about the bush?' And he said, 'Yes, angry enough to die.' ¹⁰ 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. ¹¹ 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?'

For the word of the Lord, thanks be to God.

Today's reading from the gospels: Matthew 20: 1-16

The Labourers in the Vineyard

²⁰ 'For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire labourers for his vineyard. ² After agreeing with the labourers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. ³ When he went out about nine o'clock, he saw others standing idle in the market-place; ⁴ and he said to them, "You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right." So they went. ⁵ When he went out again about noon and about three o'clock, he did the

same. ⁶ 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?" ⁷ They said to him, "Because no one has hired us." He said to them, "You also go into the vineyard." ⁸ 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." ⁹ When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. ¹⁰ Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. ¹¹ And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, ¹² 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." ¹³ 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? ¹⁴ Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. ¹⁵ Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?" ¹⁶ So the last will be first, and the first will be last.'

For the word of the Lord, thanks be to God.

**A reflection for the fifteenth Sunday after Trinity from Mrs Sue Nelms,
Licensed Lay Minister in The Lordsbridge Team**

Now, O Lord, take my lips and speak through them; take our minds and think through them; take our hearts and set them on fire with love for you. Amen.

Back in the days when I had a job that paid money, one of the hottest topics amongst my workmates was how much everyone else was paid. Were they getting more money than you? If so, what did they do that was more important than what you did? It seems from today's reading from Matthew's gospel that nothing much has changed over the years.

I have read the parable we tend to call 'the workers in the vineyard' many, many times and I always get stuck in the same rut. I end up siding with the poor 'put upon' workers who slog away all day and instead of getting what they deserve, get the same payment as all the others who came along later, especially those who only did an hour's work. I know that is not the way I should look at it, but I nearly always do and in doing that I completely miss the point of this parable.

To begin with, we should not be calling it the parable of the workers in the vineyard because it is not about them. It is about the owner of the vineyard. Jesus says it himself when he says, 'For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire labourers for his vineyard.' I have been wondering for so long why the kingdom of God was full of disgruntled people grumbling about their lot, and of course, it isn't. The kingdom of heaven is like the landowner. God is like the landowner because God is the landowner.

How might this story relate to us today?

Let's start by thinking about the workers. Life was not easy in Biblical times. Farmers and landowners worked on a smaller scale from many such employers now. They only took people on if they had specific tasks that needed doing and rather than paying them a salary, they would basically compensate the workers for their time at the end of the day to enable them to go home via the market and buy such food as might be in season. If you didn't have work, it was simple; you didn't eat.

On that basis, the strongest, most motivated people would be in the market area at the beginning of the day in order to secure any work that might be going. Landowners were not likely to be in the habit of returning to the market several times a day in order to find workers, so it was important to be there early if you wanted to eat and feed your family. There might still have been work available at 9 o'clock, after all it was still reasonably early in the day and there might still be previously unallocated jobs to do. However, as the day progressed, the chances of finding work will have diminished significantly as the idea of part-time work had not probably entered anyone's mind and, by 5 o'clock, the idea of finding work for just an hour was ludicrous!

At this moment, I begin to wonder about the type of people who ended up standing in the market as the day wore on. Why were they there then instead of first thing in the morning? Were they young and inexperienced, not necessarily understanding how such things worked? Were they depressed because they could not find work? Perhaps they were older or living with a disability that meant that it took them longer to get there. To be honest, I would have thought that the chance of anyone with a disability being able to get a job was pretty remote. Whatever their circumstances, we are told that the landowner went looking for workers right through the day, until there was just an hour's work left to do and they seem to have been eager to take whatever work was going.

So, we have a landowner who is looking for workers, not just at the beginning of the day, but throughout the whole day. A landowner who not only visits and re-visits the marketplace but who also has tasks for people to do regardless of their ability and is apparently prepared to pay them a fair wage – perhaps today they could expect Cambridge living wage rather than minimum wage?

When pay time came, much to their surprise the workers who came last and worked for only an hour received payment for a full day. What a generous landowner he was! However, he also paid the workers who had been there all day for a full day, despite them expecting more after having seen what the late comers had received. After all, in modern

terms, who would work for a company that pays the chief executive the same amount as the part-time cleaner?

And this is the really challenging aspect of this story. Our head tells us that the workers agreed a full day's work for a full day's pay and that is what they received. Our hearts scream out for the poor hard-working men who have worked so hard for so little. But, in reality, they haven't. The good landowner has done nothing wrong; he is simply generous to those with the least and I can't help thinking that he might also have walked up to the workers who made it through the last hour and said "well done, mate" because possibly on that day they had achieved something they had never managed before, something life changing.

In this parable the landowner is doing something that Jesus tells people to do so many times in the Bible. He feeds and looks after poor people, and I am sure that those people who arrived towards the end of the day will have been much poorer than those who arrived at the beginning of the day and who were used to earning a full day's wage. Just think how many times Jesus told his followers to feed poor people, care for widows, children and those most in need. And here we have this command being put into practice when the poorest workers are rewarded beyond their dreams for their work.

The kingdom of God is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire labourers for his vineyard. A God who, as Desmond Tutu said, has a plan and wants to work with us on it. A God who seeks us out to work on that plan with him just as we are, with all of our quirks. A God who wants strong, focussed workers to work throughout the day and earn the right to live with him in Heaven, people like the disciples perhaps.

A God who wants people, who may not have so much to give but who do what they can to the best of their ability, and who earn exactly the same right to live with him in Heaven, people like us perhaps. In the parable, the workers will have brought different skills and talents right through the day to the landowner and offered them to him for his use. This is what we do today whenever we try to do anything, big or small, in his name.

The landowner rewarded the workers accordingly, as he will us, and there we have the key to this parable. The landowner rewarded all of the workers with the same wage regardless of ability and productivity. God chooses to reward all those who do their best for him with the same wage, an invitation to live with him for eternity. He doesn't do part wages – you don't get to live with him for a bit of eternity – it is all or nothing.

As both readings show us this morning, it is not up to us to dictate how God should think or act. If he wishes to be generous, and we see so often that he does, who are we to stop him?