

“FOLLOWING THE KING – 60”
Matthew 20:1-16

Do you remember those days in the school playground or down the park when they were picking up teams? (This is difficult for me – the memories are still raw, even now.) You’d all stand around as the two captains chose the people they wanted in their team, alternately making their selections, starting with the very best at whatever it was you were going to play. As the teams filled up and the numbers in the group dwindled, you kept hoping you’d be the next, and eventually you’re the only one left and the two captains are arguing over who is **not** going to have you on their team. It was always the weakest, the worst, the least popular who were left until last. No-one wanted you.

Just hold that image – or memory – in your mind as we look at this passage this morning. Jesus is telling yet another parable to try and help us understand what life in the Kingdom of Heaven, or Kingdom of God, will be like. This certainly isn’t the first parable that he has prefaced with the words, “*For the kingdom of heaven is like ...*” And ever since he first made his appearance in Matthew’s story of his life and ministry, Jesus, the Kingly Messiah, has been speaking about the Kingdom, the rule of God over his creation and his people. He has used other parables, as we’ve said, but he has also talked about it directly – in The Sermon On The Mount, for example – and discussed it and debated it with his disciples and with his opponents. He has offered glimpses of what this Kingdom will be like as God restores his creation to the state he originally intended for it. As he has healed people, as he has dismissed the forces of evil from people’s lives, as he has demonstrated his own mastery over creation, as he has offered hope to the hopeless and justice to the oppressed, as he has turned despair into joy and weakness into strength, Jesus has been helping others to see that this Kingdom is worth seeking out and well worth getting involved with. But, tantalisingly, he has never given a detailed description of it – just these stories and parables. Each of them helps us to see a particular facet of the Kingdom, tells us something exciting and attractive about it: and this story here is no exception

As always, Jesus starts off where his listeners are familiar. This is a situation everyone in the villages of Galilee or Judea (where he now is) would have recognised immediately. It’s the casual labour market. In those days there were no real contracts of employment, no steady jobs with the same company, especially in the rural economy where so much of the work was seasonal anyway. If you were an unskilled labourer, you’d go out on the morning and wait in the market place until someone who wanted help came and hired you. There was no guarantee you’d get any work – and, if you did, no guarantee that you’d get it again tomorrow. If you were ill or had some kind of physical or other difficulty, there wasn’t a great deal of hope that you’d get picked by one of the foremen who were sent into the village to find a workforce for the day. You’d probably end up like the kid down the park that no-one wanted on their team.

Anyway, a landowner himself comes down to the market place at 6 o'clock one morning and hires a bunch of labourers to work in his vineyard – which probably means this is harvest time. He agrees to pay them a denarius a day, which, as we've seen in other parables, was the going rate for a day's unskilled work at that time. As the day gets going, the landowner realises that he needs a bit more help, so at 9 o'clock he goes back to find some more and settles with them that he will pay them "*whatever is right*". He does the same at noon and 3 o'clock. As the end of the working day draws closer, it becomes clear that he needs a really big push to get the work done – maybe the weather forecast is bad and he has to get as much in as possible before the next day. So at 5 o'clock – with only an hour's work left to do – he goes back to the market place one more time.

There's still a bunch of men standing round and he asks them why they haven't been working all day. (The word here for "*doing nothing*", or being idle or useless is, by the way, the Greek word "*argos*".) They reply that no-one has hired them and the reason must be that they are the ones who look weakest, who no-one wants because they might not be much good. So they and their families will have no income that day – nor, perhaps on many other days either. But the landowner tells them to hurry up and get up to the vineyard because he has work for them to do. So off they go

Just one hour later, as dusk begins to fall and they can no longer work amongst the vines, the landowner calls all the workers together to pay them for their day's work. He stands there as his foreman dishes out the wages – and he pays the people who have arrived last first, so that all the others are there to see what they get. They line up and each of them gets a denarius – the regular rate for a full day. They will be able to feed their families tonight – perhaps for the first time in a few days. As the others line up for their pay, no doubt they are expecting to get a bit more – after all, if the people who've only been working an hour are getting a full denarius, then they should be getting up to twelve times that. And no doubt those who were listening to Jesus tell the story expected that as well.

But no. Everyone gets the same wages. Even the fit, "hard-working men" (that's a phrase much loved of today's politicians, isn't it?), get just a denarius. And, quite naturally, the people who were hired earlier complain to the landowner. They've worked a full twelve hours, including working through the hottest part of the day, and these shirkers and idlers who turned up at the last minute, who worked in the cool of the late afternoon, are getting the same wages. It's not fair! It's unjust!

The landowner responds that he is not being unfair at all. He has paid everyone what he agreed with them as he hired them – and it was what they clearly agreed too or they wouldn't have taken up the job. Everyone has got what they were promised – it's all quite just and above board. The only thing is, he has

been generous to those who were probably in the most precarious position as regards the labour market and providing for their children. After all, it's his money – he can do what he likes with it and if he wants to be generous to some, then that's his prerogative. The ones who were hired first are simply being envious of the others' good fortune. And Jesus rounds off the story by repeating the idea which immediately preceded it (19:30), that the last shall be first and the first last – the Kingdom doesn't quite conform to our expectations.

Depending on where your sympathies lie as you listen to this parable, you can probably get all kinds of messages out of it. But this isn't a story about labour relations. This isn't a set of principles for running a welfare state. This isn't even about equal rights or, as some have suggested, relations between Jews and Gentiles in the Kingdom. It's not really about those who've been around long time resenting newcomers – a parable for the Church, maybe. It would be lots of fun to apply this story to any of those areas that are part of our thinking today. It's not an authentic snapshot of life in the first century and it's not a blueprint for any kind of behaviour, really. It's a story, but Jesus is telling it to make a point.

And the point is all about God's grace. The Kingdom is a place of grace – a place where God's favour is shown to everyone: the fit, hard-working, well blessed and well provided for as well as for the poor, the weak, those who normally don't get much of a look in. God's grace is given to everyone. It is **freely given** – that's the point of grace, of course, as we heard in that reading [from Ephesians 2](#).

It is **undeserved**: those men who were hired last didn't, according to most people's reckoning, I guess, deserve to be paid as much as the others. They hadn't done anything like the same amount of work and hadn't toiled through the same conditions – but they got the same! God's grace is totally undeserved. No-one can say that they deserve God's grace. What we all deserve, as a result of our sinful attitudes and behaviour, is quite the opposite. Paul, in *Romans 6:23*, writes, “*The wages of sin is death*” – wages is what we deserve – “*but the gift of God is eternal life*” – the **gift** of God.

It is **generous**. A less generous employer who nevertheless wanted to make a point might have paid them all less, rather than some more. But God wants all to have the best, particularly those who lose out in so many other ways. He showers his grace on us, and those who are most in need in other ways are often those who experience most intensely the gifts, the grace of God.

It is **irrational** in human terms. This parable is often called *The Parable Of The Workers In The Vineyard*, but someone suggested that it should be called *The Parable Of The Eccentric Employer*. It doesn't seem to make sense to us, and if we heard this story for the first time in another context we would probably be outraged at the landowner's behaviour (especially if we had had any experience of trades

unions and the like). But, as we are constantly reminded in the Bible, God's ways are not our ways. God's way is a way of grace, of unmerited favour, of outrageous generosity. And it's available to all, to everyone – rich and poor, good and bad, posh and not so posh, clever and not so clever, fit and unfit. As Fanny Crosby put it in her hymn *To God be the glory*, “*The vilest offender who truly believes, that moment from Jesus a pardon receives.*” Aren't you glad God didn't leave it to humanity to decide who gets the good stuff?

We can all be recipients of God's grace, even the wretched, the broken, the irresponsible, the sinful. That's what makes it grace! It's not just the nice people, like you and me, the ones who work hard for God, who put in the hours at church and get stuck into the tasks of the Kingdom, on whom God's favour rests. Listen to these words by Tom Wright from his thoughts on this passage:

“People who work in church circles can easily assume that they are the special ones, God's inner circle. In reality, God is out in the marketplace, looking for the people everyone tries to ignore, welcoming them on the same terms, surprising them (and everybody else) with his generous grace. The earliest church clearly needed to learn that lesson. Is there anywhere in today's church that doesn't need to be reminded of it as well?”

So, from this odd little tale comes a challenge to us – as it did to Peter and the other disciples who were getting a bit anxious about where they would be in the pecking order of the Kingdom. Don't grade people or judge people according to worldly criteria. It's not up to us to decide who receives God's favour. It's up to God.

But there's also a massive encouragement too – especially if you're like the kid who never gets picked for the team. God's freely given, undeserved, generous, irrational, outrageous grace is there for you. If you've never done so before, reach out and grab it today. And if you've already started to experience it, then rejoice from the bottom of your heart. It's God's grace for you – and it's pretty amazing!

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This is a situation everyone in the villages of Galilee or Judea (where he now is) would have recognised immediately. It's the casual labour market. In those days there were no real contracts of employment, no steady jobs with the same company, especially in the rural economy where so much of the work was seasonal anyway. If you were an unskilled labourer, you'd go out on the morning and wait in the market place until someone who wanted help came and hired you. There was no guarantee you'd get any work – and, if you did, no guarantee that you'd get it again tomorrow. If you were ill or had some kind of physical or other difficulty, there wasn't a great deal of hope that you'd get picked by one of the foremen who were sent into the village to find a workforce for the day.

A landowner comes down to the market place at 6 o'clock one morning and hires a bunch of labourers to work in his vineyard. He agrees to pay them a denarius a day, the going rate for a day's unskilled work at that time. At 9 o'clock he goes back to find some more and settles with them that he will pay them "whatever is right". He does the same at noon and 3 o'clock. At 5 o'clock – with only an hour's work left to do – he goes back to the market place one more time. There are still men there and the reason must be that they are the ones who look weakest, who no-one wants because they might not be much good. At the end of the day he pays the people who have arrived last first, so that all the others are there to see what they get. They line up and each of them gets a denarius – the regular rate for a full day. And then everyone gets the same wages. Even the fit, "hard-working men" get just a denarius. And they complain to the landowner.

The landowner responds that he is not being unfair at all. He has paid everyone what he agreed with them as he hired them – and it was what they clearly agreed too or they wouldn't have taken up the job. Everyone has got what they were promised – it's all quite just and above board. The only thing is, he has been generous to those who were probably in the most precarious position as regards the labour market and providing for their children.

And the point is all about God's grace. The Kingdom is a place of grace – a place where God's favour is shown to everyone. It is **freely given** – that's the point of grace (look at *Ephesians 2:1-10*).

It is **undeserved**. No-one can say that they deserve God's grace. Paul, in *Romans 6:23*, writes, "The wages of sin is death" – wages is what we deserve – "but the gift of God is eternal life" – the **gift** of God.

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It is **irrational** in human terms. But, as we are constantly reminded in the Bible, God's ways are not our ways. God's way is a way of grace, of unmerited favour, of outrageous generosity. We can all be recipients of God's grace, even the wretched, the broken, the irresponsible, the sinful. That's what makes it grace!

Questions for discussion

1. Imagine you are hearing this story for the very first time. Where do your sympathies lie? Why?
2. What do you understand by grace? How have you experienced it personally?

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3. God's love seems irrational to us. For some that means it is not worth thinking about. How would you respond to someone who said that?
4. Does this parable give you any more insight into what the Kingdom of God is like?
5. What have you learned from this story that you didn't know before?

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