
Sunday 20th September – The Fifteenth Sunday after Trinity

Readings: Exodus 16:2-15 & Matthew 20:1-16

Exodus 16:2-15

In the desert the whole community grumbled against Moses and Aaron. The Israelites said to them, 'If only we had died by the Lord's hand in Egypt! There we sat round pots of meat and ate all the food we wanted, but you have brought us out into this desert to starve this entire assembly to death.'

Then the Lord said to Moses, 'I will rain down bread from heaven for you. The people are to go out each day and gather enough for that day. In this way I will test them and see whether they will follow my instructions. On the sixth day they are to prepare what they bring in, and that is to be twice as much as they gather on the other days.'

So Moses and Aaron said to all the Israelites, 'In the evening you will know that it was the Lord who brought you out of Egypt, and in the morning you will see the glory of the Lord, because he has heard your grumbling against him. Who are we, that you should grumble against us?' Moses also said, 'You will know that it was the Lord when he gives you meat to eat in the evening and all the bread you want in the morning, because he has heard your grumbling against him. Who are we? You are not grumbling against us, but against the Lord.'

Then Moses told Aaron, 'Say to the entire Israelite community, "Come before the Lord, for he has heard your grumbling."'

While Aaron was speaking to the whole Israelite community, they looked towards the desert, and there was the glory of the Lord appearing in the cloud.

The Lord said to Moses, 'I have heard the grumbling of the Israelites. Tell them, "At twilight you will eat meat, and in the morning you will be filled with bread. Then you will know that I am the Lord your God."'

That evening quail came and covered the camp, and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. When the dew was gone, thin flakes like frost on the ground appeared on the desert floor. When the Israelites saw it, they said to each other, 'What is it?' For they did not know what it was.

Moses said to them, 'It is the bread the Lord has given you to eat.'

Matthew 20:1-16

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

‘About nine in the morning 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 noon and about three in the afternoon and did the same thing. About five in the afternoon 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 five in the afternoon 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 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, “I am not being unfair to you, friend. Didn’t you agree to work for a denarius? Take your pay and go. I want to give the one 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.’

Reflection

When I was a child, my parents had strong views about how we should behave at the meal table; especially when it came to tea-time. This was high tea, Scottish style, beginning with something savoury, followed by bread and butter or jam, and finally cake. Cake was always served at the end of the meal. My mother’s cakes were legendary. We would always eye up the plate to work out which piece was the biggest!

To challenge our greediness, our parents thought up another house rule. We always had to take the piece that was on the top, nearest to us. I still remember one particular Sunday. Chocolate cake for tea and my parents decided to teach us a lesson. They cut one enormous piece of cake which they put at the bottom of the plate. They then built a tower of slices which got smaller and smaller finishing with a tiny slice. On the basis of the "on the top, nearest to you" rule, the first person was going to get a very raw deal. Remember, we always began with savouries and bread. The slice of cake always signified that we had got to the end of the meal.

We all watched and waited to see who would crack first, eating our way through slice after slice of bread. No one wanted the first slice of cake. We all hoped that we would be the lucky one, to get the largest piece. How my parents must have laughed! Eventually they took pity on us and cut the large slice into equal pieces so we could finish our meal and leave the table. I tell this story because children have a strong sense of what is "fair" from a very early age. If we are honest, we never lose it.

Don't your sympathies lie with the disgruntled workers in Jesus' story? The word "fair" hovers in the background when the first lot of workers were offered a denarius to work in the landowner's vineyard (this was a fair wage for a fair day's work). They started early – around dawn. The second group were hired around 9am and the landowner told them, "I will pay you whatever is right" in other words, "whatever is fair."

The landowner went out again at midday and 3pm, and the final selection was made at 5pm. It's easy to understand the anger of the first group who had been working since sun-up when they saw everyone receiving the same amount. Verse 11 "They began to grumble" In other words, "It's not fair!" Notice the answer of the landowner; "Friend, I am not being UNFAIR. Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?" This is one of the keys to the story. It describes the limitless generosity of God, which stretches far beyond what "fair" deserves.

The story finishes with the enigmatic comment. "So the last will be first and the first will be last". What does Jesus mean by this? We know the men who were hired in the evening were paid before those hired in the morning - but is there more? To answer, imagine you are a landowner searching for hired help. You would look for men who were strong and responsible. Matthew 20:6 is very revealing. When the landowner asked the last group of men why they weren't working, they replied: "Because no one hired us". In other words, "No one wanted us." Yet the landowner (God) took them on and treated them the same as everyone else. The "unwanted"

ones discovered that the landowner (God) valued them and wanted them just as much as all the others.

God's grace cannot be earned. We do not work our way into the Kingdom however much we may try to! When God blesses us, it is not a reward for work we have done, nor is it a wage we have earned that we can bargain with; rather it is an overflow of God's generous nature, which he freely offers to all. Yet although we constantly hear of God's unconditional love, we always struggle to believe this! Just as the disciples struggled!

We often think we deserve special favour for the things that we have done; or for the length of time we have followed the Lord. We're not the first to say this! Jesus' disciples hoped for special privileges because they had been with him from the beginning. (Matthew 19). The mother of Zebedee's sons also sought special honour for her boys (Matthew 20).

Both times Jesus warned them that God's kingdom is not like any earthly kingdom. Those who would win honour must be prepared to suffer; must be prepared to bow down and serve. That many who are first will be last, and the last first. We follow Jesus, who "made himself nothing" when he took on human form in order to save us; Philippians 2:7.

None of us deserve God's grace "more" than others; none of us deserve God's grace "less" - just as we cannot "do" anything to make God love us "more" or "less". As children of the Kingdom we are called to live in the light of this truth; extending the same generosity and welcome to all those whom God brings our way. After listening to this story of the workers in the vineyard, we may be surprised! Let's welcome everyone who comes to us as a blessing; because this is how God sees them.

Amen.

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