

Matthew 20: 1 –16 God's unimaginable grace

Intro

How often do you ever get something for nothing, is there such a thing, is there such a thing as a free lunch, or is there always a catch, a price to pay? We are often faced with offers we cannot refuse, offers which seem reasonable, but there's always some sort of cost implication. Each time I visit a supermarket I am faced with a barrage of buy one get one free offers, and in theory I'm getting one product for nothing. But I have often wondered if I could ask the manager for the free one without having to buy the one which costs money. Somehow, I don't think he would let me take the free one away without actually buying the first one.

Bible

Today we live in a world which is conditioned by contracts and agreements, if we get one free, we have to buy one in the first place, that's what the contract says. If we buy something we have to pay for it, if we earn money we have to work for it. There are very few things which actually give us something for nothing.

The parable of the vineyard workers is much the same, in that it is based on the agreement of 'doing a fair days work, for a fair days

pay'. And if you can imagine, the situation in the parable is not dissimilar to the sort of thing that still happens in places like the fields of Lincolnshire today, workers gathering to be hired for the day looking for an agreed rate of pay.

But in this parable Jesus turns that idea of some sort of contract completely on its head. I have often thought how unfair this parable was, how could Jesus tell this story of the poor labourers who work all day and end up getting a poor deal. Those men hired at the beginning of the day end up with the same amount of money as the ones who didn't start work till five o'clock, what is fair about that? I know Audrey jokingly calls this the "Industrial Relations Gospel", what would the trade unions have to say in this situation. It's certainly a case for pending strike action. And if you had a business and were an employer, you wouldn't gain much loyalty from your workforce if that was to be your model of employment.

Jesus

Jesus told this parable after Peter was inquiring about what sort of things the disciples might gain by following Jesus. If any one of the disciples were to be bold enough to ask this question, we know it would be Peter, putting his foot in it again. But in some ways he's only thinking on the same lines as we would. Peter thought he had

kept his side of the bargain, he had left everything to follow Jesus, and therefore knew he had kept his side of an agreement, but he wasn't sure of what Jesus' side of the bargain was, Peter's natural reaction, of course, was that he wanted to know what his fair share would be, now he had given everything up. Peter is only asking the same question as some people would ask today, "what's in it for me" or "if I do something what will I get in return", "if I buy one, will I get one free". And so to put Peter straight and to illustrate heavenly inheritance with regards to service Jesus told this parable of the vineyard workers.

Not fair

To us, the agreement of the parable doesn't look fair, it goes against our understanding of 'fairness', surely they should all be paid according to their hours of work. But a careful look at the parable text reveals something different, the laborers who were hired at the beginning of the day made an agreement with the landowner as to how much they would be paid, they made a contract about their just reward. The other workers who were hired throughout the day made no such contract and were paid the amount which the landowner saw fit, which happened to be the same amount for everyone. But this parable isn't just about reading

the small print, it really does say to us something about God unending grace.

School

When I was at school, I hated some of the sports which involved a ball, football, cricket or soft ball. I was never very dexterous or coordinated, I was one of those kids who always seemed to miss catching the ball or managed to kick the ball in the wrong direction, I had two left feet and hands which couldn't catch or throw. I was good at other sports particularly running and athletics, but never any of those team games, and what I really hated most was when we all lined up to pick teams, I was always one of the last one or two to be picked, rejected because of my lack of sporting prowess. (At this point in the sermon you are supposed to give a big aww!) I know I'm not alone, I'm sure other people have experienced something similar, some kind of rejection or that feeling of being unwanted.

Gospel

Thinking about this morning's Gospel story, did those people standing around in the marketplace all day feel unwanted and hopeless, just as the last of the children to be picked for the football team. Focusing on them, the labourers chosen last, can help us

deal with our niggling sense of unfairness we feel about this story. Yes, some of those workers had been toiling all day in the heat of the vineyard, and so it doesn't seem right those who started later in day should get the same wage. If we focus on those who are chosen first, we do risk falling into the trap that the landowner mentions at the end of the story when he says: "Are you jealous because I am generous?"

But let's put ourselves in the shoes of those unwanted labourers, the ones who presumably didn't look very strong, or maybe wore the wrong clothes or looked like the wrong type, or for whatever reason they didn't get chosen earlier in the day. If we put ourselves in their shoes, we can share their joy at being chosen - and then even receiving the same wage! Suddenly those people were considered just as worthy of a reward as the stronger ones, the ones whose faces fitted, the more confident ones.

Reward

Peter wanted to know from Jesus what kind of reward the disciples might expect for giving up everything to follow him and the story was his response. All of the labourers, the first and the last, represent disciples who serve God, people who work together to establish the kingdom of heaven. Astonishingly to our human way

of thinking, Jesus teaches that, however long it takes for someone to join his team, our reward will be the same. God's system of justice isn't like any human ones we know. God doesn't give to us according to what is "fair" or according to what we "deserve". God's love has nothing to do with fairness. Of course there's a place for that in human life, but there's also a need for compassion and love which is beyond that human understanding.

Compassion

The Bible tells us that God is full of compassion and grace, and that God's generosity is for all, so that everyone can know the joy of being chosen by God. People who have come to faith early in their lives, and served in God's vineyard for many years, can sometimes feel superior to latecomers. Yet, Jesus frequently warns people against getting above themselves, and from this story we see that everyone's reward is given in equal measure, there are no favorites in God's kingdom.

Unlike the team captains picking the best in the playground, God chooses and calls us despite our weakness, our faults or our ability to perform. In response to his call we might have been labouring in the vineyard from right at the beginning of the day, or we may not hear the Lord calling until much later in our lives. In God there is no

difference because Jesus gave his life for the weak and strong alike, those for whom faith is easy and those for whom it is a struggle, those who have served him all their lives and those who join in much later.

Our God is generous, loving, compassionate and full of unimaginable grace, his rewards remain the same for everyone, and yet the rewards for knowing him remain far beyond our own human understanding. May we all accept God's loving grace and receive his reward gladly in our hearts and minds.