

PENTECOST 16A 20-09-2020 *The Reverend Lorna Green*

Exodus 16.2-15; Ps 105.1-6, 37-45; Philippians 1.21-30; *Matthew 20.1-16*

*'For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire labourers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the labourers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. When he went out about nine o'clock, he saw others standing idle in the market-place; and he said to them, "You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right." So they went. When he went out again about noon and about three o'clock, he did the same. 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?" They said to him, "Because no one has hired us." He said to them, "You also go into the vineyard." 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." When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, 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." 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? Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?" So the last will be first, and the first will be last.'*

Last week we heard about the people of Israel escaping from Egypt, away from slavery and oppression. Today we find them in the wilderness a few weeks later, and what are they doing? Complaining. There isn't any food, so they gang up against Moses and Aaron and blame them.

'Why did you bring us here? At least we had enough to eat in Egypt! We would be better off if we'd died there, rather than slowly starving out here!'

So God gave them quails in the evening and manna in the morning, and they had plenty to eat. Not only that, but they were shown God's glory to reassure them that God was with them and would never leave them.

Out there in the wilderness God was creating a new people who would embody an alternative to the ways of Egypt- the ways of domination and submission, rich and poor, powerful and powerless. The gift of manna is central to forming this new people, because it is for everyone, and everyone has enough.

Able and disabled, old and young, everybody gets what they need- no more and no less.

It is the daily bread for which we pray in the Lord's Prayer; it is what Jesus enacted when he fed the multitude with bread and fish so that everyone had plenty to eat, no one had too much or too little.

Jesus also sought to create a new order and a new people. He told this parable of the workers in the vineyard to his disciples who were struggling to get their heads around how God's kingdom would or could work in the world as they knew it- and as we know it.

How does our world work? Our society operates on contrasts and differences between superior and inferior, rich and poor, employer and employee, employed and unemployed; you can probably think of others.

Jesus showed his disciples and us a different reality in this parable. In this reality, everyone receives the same 'daily bread'- enough money to buy food for the day- whether they have worked one hour or eight hours. The landowner, instead of maintaining the differences between the labourers depending on their performance, instead of reinforcing the idea that those who started early were better or more deserving than those who came late, treated them all as equals.

This is unsettling and disturbing for us, as we assume it is only right and fair that one who works hard for a long time should be paid more than someone who puts in minimum effort. It's so obvious we don't need to explain it- of course that's the way it should be!

Jesus shows us a different way that turns our assumptions on their heads. He says that in the kingdom everyone is given plenty- but not too much- rather than competing and struggling in an unequal marketplace.

This is a vision of a new social order, which is like the order God envisioned for the Israelites in the wilderness. It is so different to the social order in which we live that we can barely imagine it. Can we imagine a world without competition, without winners and losers; a society in which people who don't have paid work don't need to feel inferior?

In the parable, when the early workers have seen the latecomers receiving the same pay, they say, "You have made them equal to us!" This is at the heart of their aggrieved feelings and outrage. They had worked in the hot sun all day and surely deserved more than those who turned up at the last minute.

But they all had to put food on the table; they all needed their daily bread. For the landowner and for God, this isn't about who deserves more or less, it is about graciously fulfilling need.

When Paul wrote his letter to the people in Philippi he was probably in prison awaiting trial. He said it was hard for him to decide which he preferred: to get it over with and die, because then he would be with Jesus, or to keep fighting on, because then he could support and encourage the believers. He chose life, and said that for him to live or die was all about Jesus anyway.

Paul encouraged the believers to stand together, to be united and strong in their faith. They would face hard times and perhaps persecution, as he was currently; and he reminded them that they had been 'granted the privilege of not only believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well.'

When all these scriptures talk about the Kingdom of God they are not referring to the place good Christians go to when they die. They are talking about life here, on earth, today. Living in the kingdom means living in the 'now-and-not-yet' that is God's dream.

We are to live and work together as citizens of this kingdom that is not yet here in all its fulness. That's what it means to be IN the world but not OF the world. We need to think outside the box of the way things are and work for the way things could and should be.

You may have heard this challenge before, but it's worth repeating: If being a Christian was illegal and you were arrested, would there be enough evidence to convict you? Is your life sufficiently different from that of your neighbour that anyone would notice?

Jesus said, "The last will be first, and the first will be last." On its own this statement flies in the face of everything we learn from childhood about working and studying hard, doing your best to improve yourself, winning the race, beating the opposing team, striving for promotion and higher wages- being the 'best that you can be', even if that will mean stepping on someone else to get there.

Jesus's disciples struggled to get their heads around what living in the kingdom meant, and in some ways it's even harder for us. We don't have the clear demarcation between master and slave, ruler and the ruled, with which they lived. All the same we share the world with those who are the last, the least, and the lost. What would Jesus have us do?

The Lord be with you.