

**A Sermon by Canon Maggie Guite    20/09/20**  
**Bartlow Evensong**

**20A**

**God's Kingdom and those at the back of the queue**

**Matt 20.1-16**

I'm sure that most of you have heard the parable about the labourers in the vineyard preached about several or many times in your life. And, unsurprisingly, perhaps, the burden of most such sermons would probably have been shaped by the questions 'Was it fair that the people who worked least got paid first, and paid as much?'

I wouldn't be surprised if you remembered that the conclusion of the preachers you've heard on the subject was basically that none of us deserves everything we get from God – his generosity is abounding and indiscriminate. We can never repay him by our labour or our virtue for the gifts of relationship with him, eternal life, and all the blessings we enjoy in this life. So, we are in no position to carp at God's generosity – we all depend on it.

And all that is true.

Clearly, when Jesus first told his parable there would have been people in the crowd who would have reacted as many of us do, on first hearing, that the way the

landowner treated his workers was unfair; Jesus was telling them something important about the nature of God, and our relationship to him and each other.

But there would also have been people in that crowd who were struck by another kind of unfairness – the unfairness there was in people who stood around in the market place all day, in the sun or the rain – and yet they could get no work in the ordinary run of things. These were the landless labourers of Jesus' day – and there were plenty of them. Studies of the economic history of first century Palestine have shown that this was a time when the elite of Jerusalem were buying up large quantities of land, turning people off it, creating a large class of the unemployed totally dependent on what we'd call today 'zero hours' contracts: get what work you can, and be paid exactly for that- and then start hoping for work again tomorrow. No security, no dignity, no fairness for the worker or his family.

This story happens again and again in human history – whether we think of the period of the enclosures in England, which created a vast number of totally indigent people, many of whom took to the roads as vagrants (and were savagely prosecuted for that), or the situation in many developing countries today where small tenants and indigenous peoples are turned off the land they work, whether by legal or by totally violent means to create huge plantations – and in the cities, slums full of people who have no regular work or means of support.

And, of course, we have plenty of people working on zero hours contracts, or only getting irregular agency work in our own society, too. I know- my son is one of them - and it's no way to live. Certainly, no security. So – there would have been landless labourers listening to Jesus who would have felt sharply the injustice of their situation, the unfairness of always being at the back of the queue.

How would the parable have struck them? Well, not as something to quarrel with, but as definitely 'good news'. Because I want you to notice something we often overlook: at the beginning of this parable Jesus says: *'The kingdom of heaven is like...'* - not *'God is like...'* Of course, the nature of God is shown in his kingdom – so we do indeed learn about his generosity through this parable – but Jesus' teaching was explicitly about *'God's kingdom'*, and we shouldn't forget that.

What is the kingdom? The Gospels tell us that it was at the centre of Jesus' teaching: he came into Galilee proclaiming that *'The Kingdom of God has drawn near ...'* It was his proclamation that the age of the Messiah was dawning – the age as he explained in the words of Isaiah in the synagogue in Nazareth when he, as the Messiah, the anointed one, would *'bring good news to the poor,...release to the captives...recovery of sight to the blind and let the oppressed go free. 'In him, in Jesus, the year of the Lord's favour had come...'*

So, when Jesus proclaimed the kingdom of God he wasn't just proclaiming that there is a heaven we will go to when we die, through the overwhelming generosity and goodness of God: he was also proclaiming that something was happening *on this earth* - through him. As he told John the Baptist's followers, *'Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offence at me.'* (Mt.11.5)

Something was happening in Jesus, partly through his miracles, but also through the bringing of good news to the poor that in God's order of things they would not be at the back of the queue for ever. *'Blessed are you poor, for yours is the kingdom of God'* - and *'the meek shall inherit the earth...'*

We know that Jesus was not a violent revolutionary, but that's not to say that *what he did and said* wasn't revolutionary. He was preaching and living out a kingdom in which the last would be first – not at the back of the queue anymore. He took children, the lame and the maimed into the Temple – run by the Jerusalem elite and corrupted very much to for their purposes – even though it was said those 'insignificant' or unclean people shouldn't be there. He challenged the order of things emphatically.

And I think we can guess that his intention was that his followers should go on challenging the order of things – bringing people forward from the back of the queue, challenging those who feel they're entitled to be permanently at the front.

We may not on the whole have the power to work miracles (though perhaps there's more power for that in God's people than we like to allow); but we are still kingdom people – proclaiming Jesus as Lord and Messiah and praying for his kingdom to come on earth. And what we pray for, we should surely work for.

So, who are the people at the back of the queue in the world of today – the people who are reduced to complete dependency, and sometimes reviled and blamed for being there? What are the obstacles we could challenge and overcome – in ourselves, as much in society around – which keep people there – the prejudices, the assumptions, the acceptance of the unfair *status quo* as 'normal', all those attitudes which entrench the situation?

Of course it's good for people to work for what they earn, and to have that dignity; but what about those who can't work, or who never have the dignity of decent and secure employment, or the people who are held back because of unconscious assumptions that they could never do well? Surely issues such as entrenched

racism, to name but one, come in here. That's why it's necessary to assert to ourselves, and to society that 'Black lives matter', to shake us out of hidden prejudices and their corrosive effects.

God *is* aboundingly generous to us all: he does unfailingly offer us the gifts of forgiveness, relationship with him and eternal life. We could never by our work have earned all this. But as his kingdom-people, can we reflect this attitude into human affairs, and let go of any concept, deep in our hearts that some people are less worthy than others to be at the front of the queue?