

## 05 Trinity 17

**Readings: Philippians 1:21-30; Matthew 20:1-16**

### What are we worth?

*“And when they received their wage 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.’”*

*Matthew 20:12*

Last weekend was our wedding anniversary, so we piled the girls into the car and took a spur of the moment overnight break at a hotel just outside London. Having carefully chosen the hotel for its indoor pool, I managed to leave my swimming costume behind, with the result that Antony spent most of the 24 hours managing a baby and an excited three year old in the water, whilst I lazed in the hotel spa indulging in massages and manicures. It was fantastic – though I think I came out of it owing a favour or two.

A clergy staff meeting this week found us grappling with the parable of the workers in the vineyard – a complete coincidence – I don’t usually contrive to get my sermon preparation done by the whole team – and discovering that it is a story which raises conflicting feelings and difficult questions to which it offers no easy answers.

If we’re honest, many of us find it hard to watch someone who’s put in much less effort get the same amount of glory as ourselves. Though the landowner’s justification of his decision leaves us with mixed feelings: ‘Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me?’ - we rejoice in his quirky generosity whilst feeling frustrated at the sometimes arbitrary nature of the indulgence of the rich.

What exactly is this parable trying to say about the kingdom of heaven? It may be making the obvious points that recruitment happens to different people at different times – and that all are equally valued regardless of how late in the day they join up. Perhaps it’s saying that idleness is not appreciated in the kingdom: ‘Why are you standing idle all day?’ – on the other hand the central point seems to be that the idle are rewarded on the same level as those whose lives have been one long graft.

The answers aren’t clear, but essentially the questions seem to be about how people are rewarded for the way that they use their time – or perhaps on a deeper level, how they are valued regardless of their ability or opportunity or maybe even willingness to buy into a particular definition of productivity.

I’m in danger of revealing more about my lifestyle choices than is wise this morning, but I’m short of illustrations so I haven’t that much choice. My absolutely favourite night of the week is Friday. Being one of a rare breed of clergy who are privileged to work a five day week rather than six, Friday is the first of my two days off. I’m fortunate enough to spend it - willingly though with a slight sense of exhaustion - at the beck and call of the three year old and baby.

So by the end of the day I’m rejoicing in the fact that no major physical harm has befallen them – I can be less sure about psychological damage but future years will tell – and I reach the evening with an irrepressible longing for idleness. So whilst Antony is reading the last of Hannah’s endless bedtime stories I sneak out of the flat and head for either the local Thai or Indian restaurant. Where, having ordered the usual takeaway because I haven’t enough mental energy to choose anything

different, I while away the waiting time over a bottle of beer, then return home bearing culinary gifts so that we can both collapse in front of whatever trash Friday night television has to offer.

This whole scenario could, of course, be a symptom of wasteful living. A wanton waste of the precious resource of our time. Or it could indicate that there are times when just being consciously present to another person is the most – and the best – that is demanded of us.

And what does that say about God? Well perhaps it says what the parable appears to say. That God is not only to be served through activity, solid achievement, the delivery of the next project. Perhaps there are time when the most that God wants of us is that we are attentive to the divine presence in the essential stuff of the life which we live, in the people we are given to love, in the physicality of life as we live it, even in ourselves.

How do allow ourselves the possibility of admitting that it's okay to do things which have no concrete measurable output? In our results-driven society even asking the question can be disorientating. How do we create institutions, communities, roles, where people who work in a variety of ways and at different paces are equally respected. How do we honour the contribution of those who do their thinking slowly, or who spend a lifetime grappling with one particular issue which doesn't seem to us to be of ultimate value.

How do we recognise that we are all made differently and made that way by God? Churches are great at honouring those who work harder than appears healthy. But how do we say to others 'It's okay to have spent some of your life idle – there's still a place for you in the kingdom'? And how do we discern in ourselves the difference between allowing ourselves that optimum level of pressure which enables us to be a human being fully alive, and the indulgence of that pressure to the point where work is a drug?

I don't know the answers to any of these questions but I do believe that God would have us engage with them. We all in some way reflect God's image. If we aren't allowed to do that differently and in the glory of our diversity then in the end we are monochrome and very very earnest.

As a parable of economic theory the labourers in the vineyard is not at its most enlightening. And the recruitment method it describes is very odd. But recruitment and economics are probably not where the point lies. This is not a story about systems or processes and it doesn't describe a particular work ethic. It simply asks the stark question: what measure do we use to value what another person does?

This is a church with a business. A business which works to generate income which in turn supports the work of the church. In that scenario processes, strategies, outcomes and profit all matter. It matters too, for the business and for the church, to ask: how do we welcome the contributions of people with a variety of approaches to work? Who is valued for what? How do we describe and affirm that value? And how might we encourage people to experience life beyond this place, that they might bring with them the richness of understanding gained elsewhere in God's world?

*'... 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 ...'*