

Year A Proper 25 The Labourers in the Vineyard, Matt 20, 1 to 16

Most people get to the spot in the story where the householder pays the same amount to the labourers who worked all day as he does to those who worked for only one hour and they think, “That’s not fair.”

They hear the householder explain that he’s done nothing wrong – he paid the workers what they’d agreed on; he can do what he wants with his money, and they think, “Okay, fine – but it still doesn’t seem very fair.”

Now, don’t worry if you’re one of those people thinking it’s not fair. The story sets us up to think that way. Jesus wants to get his listeners’ attention – get them thinking. So, what exactly are we supposed to be thinking about?

First of all, why is it that we don’t think the workers were treated fairly? Do we think those workers hired late in the day deserved less than the usual daily wage? Do we think the first workers deserved more?

“Deserved”...we’ve talked about this word before. The householder in this story can be seen to represent God – God has very often been referred to as the owner of a vineyard - and we know we don’t deserve what God gives us. We know there is nothing we can do to earn God’s love, his grace, his forgiveness, his generosity – God gives us all of that while we are yet sinners. We don’t deserve any of that but all we must do is claim it. It’s ours.

God has given us everything – not because we deserve it but because he wants to. In today’s story, Jesus tells us that God gives to everyone equally. We live in a society where some people are seen as better than other people. Jesus and his disciples lived in a society like that too. Some people were more religious, some were more wealthy, some had more land, some had higher status...God erases all of that. He doesn’t play favourites. God loves each one of us just as much as he loves Mother Theresa. He loves each of us just as much as he loves billionaire Bill Gates.

We learn from the story that God is, time after time, coming to us, inviting us to join him but he doesn’t need us. The householder kept going back to the market

place to get more and more workers but, after the first trip, the story didn't say anything about him needing more workers. He was just gathering up all of the labourers who were not working so that he could pay all of them a wage for the day.

We learn important things about God from this story...He invites us to him, he gives freely of his love and grace and forgiveness without us meriting it. And because we can't earn these things, no one, in God's eyes, is any better than anyone else – God gives equally to all who claim these gifts.

But, we're not done with the story yet. Jesus wants to surprise his listeners with his stories. He always wants to get them thinking. More importantly, he wants to change their thinking. So where is the surprising bit in this story?

The surprising bit is that Jesus not only wants us to see the householder as a symbol for God but also as a symbol for ourselves.

Matthew deliberately uses the same word here for householder as he did earlier to refer to Jesus' disciples. Jesus had used a series of parables to teach his disciples about God's kingdom – it is like a treasure hidden in a field, a woman mixing yeast into dough, a merchant finding a pearl of great value, etc. – then, when Jesus asked his disciples if they'd understood and they answered "yes", Jesus said to them, "Good, now you who have been trained for the kingdom of God are like a householder who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old." The householder is the faithful follower, not God.

Jesus wants us to put ourselves into the shoes of the householder. Why? Because he wants us to live the kingdom life now. At the beginning of his ministry, Jesus proclaims, "Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand." In Mark he says, "The time is fulfilled". In Luke he says, "Today the Scriptures have been fulfilled in your hearing." There is nothing about "at a later time" or "down the road" or "at some point in the future." No. The time is now. The kingdom of God is at hand now. The Jewish people were waiting for the arrival of the Messiah who would bring the Day of the Lord – when everyone and all of creation would be redeemed. Jesus tells them to stop waiting – the time is now. With Jesus'

teachings, healings, miracles, and especially with his death and resurrection, he revealed God's kingdom here on earth now. This is big news.

Throughout his years of ministry, Jesus doesn't teach people how to get into God's kingdom after they died, he taught people how to live in God's kingdom. He focused on how to live in love and harmony with God and with each other. Jesus often, as in today's story, talked about the responsibility of the rich. He followed the words of Deuteronomy 15:11 which says, "I command you, 'Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbour in your land.'" Jesus challenges rich people to support labourers – all of them – by doing more than just helping the ones at the doorstep but also seeking out those in need.

None of us here probably considers ourselves to be rich like the householder in today's story but we all have something to give – if not money, we perhaps have clothes or other things, we have time, energy, compassion, friendship – we have all sorts of blessings to share.

We also need to see ourselves in the shoes of the workers. It's easy to be the grateful worker working one hour but being paid for 12. But what about the workers who worked all day and were paid the same? Jesus clearly places their grumbling jealous attitude in a bad light and yet that is exactly how society trains us to think. We live in a merit-based society – everyone is judged on skills, education, position,and we get what we deserve. There's that word again.

Jesus challenges us to change that attitude in ourselves and in the people around us – to stop thinking about what is 'fair' and to start thinking about what is 'right'. New Testament scholar, Brad H. Young, says, "The labourers should have been happy about the good fortune of their coworkers who, because of the generosity of the landowner, would now have enough provision for their families." That will be a tough point of view to sell in our society but we start selling it by living it.

With no more jealousy stemming from differences in social status or wealth and with everyone having enough to provide for their families, that truly would be God's kingdom here on earth – and that is exactly Jesus' point.

Live the kingdom life now. We all have a very important role to play in revealing the kingdom that we know will be fully complete on earth as in heaven. After Jesus' resurrection, he commissioned his disciples – and us – to continue his work of spreading the good news, healing the sick, freeing the captives, bringing relief to the oppressed. Every time we love; every time we give; every time we forgive we reveal God's kingdom. Every single good thing we do matters. It matters to God and it matters to the revelation of his kingdom. Every single good thing we accomplish will be a part of the fully redeemed world that we know is coming. Jesus got it started. With him, we keep it going.

Let's stop waiting...the kingdom of God is at hand. The time is fulfilled. Today these Scriptures have been fulfilled in your hearing. This is big news.