

Proper 20 Year A 2020

I worked out this week that it is thirty years since I was first asked to preach – whilst I was training for ministry – and yet I cannot ever remember preaching on this Gospel reading – perhaps because Colin and I always went on holiday in September. And when I looked in my archive, which goes back about fifteen years, I could only find one sermon for this Sunday – three years ago, at Arpefeelie, when I preached about Jonah and his anger at God for not punishing the people of Nineveh for their wickedness – ‘It’s not fair’ was his cry ‘they don’t deserve your generous mercy’. On that theme, we could ask did the late comers to the vineyard deserve the landowner’s generosity?

The widely accepted interpretation of this parable – the labourers in the vineyard – is that the landowner is God, we are the labourers in his field, and even though we don’t deserve it, we receive God’s gracious, generous mercy – like the people of Nineveh. And that this parable came as a warning to the disciples – and to us – not to think we deserve more than the Johnny-come-latelies who suddenly find faith when faced with the prospect of death.

But the more I thought about it, the more I thought that that is not what this parable is about.

So let us look at this parable another way. What if the rich landowner is – a rich landowner? And what if the labourers are just that – day labourers?

It must be harvest time, if the landowner has so much work that he needs every man he can find. He wants the grapes cut and gathered before the rain arrives – he has a valuable crop – the wine he makes is a marketable, and transportable, commodity. So first thing in the morning, he is after workers. We are told that he agreed with the men in the market place ‘for the usual daily wage’, which would have been one denarius. Well, you can take the ‘agreement’ with a shovel full of salt – it would have been ‘take it or leave it’. Plenty of men were looking for work – once the harvest was over there would have been no work, and hunger, even starvation, would have faced them. And even though one denarius would not have been enough to feed a family, it was better than nothing. The landowner has total power in this situation, and the workers are powerless. Zero hours contracts, gig economy, less than the living wage – but what can you do? Three more times he goes out and finds workers and invites them to work for him and ‘I will pay you what is right’ – that is, we presume, the least he can get away with. And then at five in the afternoon he finds some more men hanging around – ‘why are you standing here idle all day?’ Because no one has hired us’. Why weren’t they here earlier? Why has no one hired them? perhaps because their skin is the wrong colour, perhaps they are gay, perhaps they are thieves (if you don’t get work you need to steal), perhaps they speak a different language or worship God in a different way, perhaps the local lads had threatened them – you can’t come here stealing out jobs, depressing the wage rate – whatever, they too are told to go to

the vineyard, although no mention of pay is made – they just have to trust that they will get something – even if it is only a bag on rotten grapes.

And then it comes to pay time. The landowner has a manager, so he doesn't need to be there – but he is, and he is very specific about the way the pay is handed out – those who came last are now first, and the ones who came first see what is happening and are justifiably (?????) angry that everyone gets the same amount. When one complains – 'you have made them equal to us' – he is addressed by the landowner as 'friend'. How insulting can you be? This isn't a relationship of friendship, it is absolute power speaking to the powerless – and instead of the powerless coming together and saying unless you pay us more your grapes can rot, he has managed to divide the labour force into factions of us and them.

The landowner had told the men that he would pay them what was right – but who is to define what is right? Apparently, the landowner. And by right, does he mean what you need to put food on the table, pay the rent, put shoes on your children's feet or does he mean what I can get away with and still command respect in the community? He has the uncontested – uncontestable – power to decide who deserves what, who should benefit from his generosity, and who should not. There is difference between what is lawful and what is just – between minimum wage and living wage

And so now, we become the labourers. We have some work to do with this parable. Do we identify with the landowner who believes – or says he

believes – that he is both just and generous, or do we identify with the workers who got what was just, but was clearly unfair?

If we think that the lord of the vineyard is God, inevitably we have to interpret his actions as generous and the complaint of the early workers as unjustified. If, on the other hand, we believe that the lord of the vineyard is an exploitative employer driving down wages and dividing the work force against itself, subverting the possibility of solidarity, we will look on him in a different light – and given that there will be so many people out of work this winter, the opportunity for wage depression might be something we should be concerned about.

And if we see this parable this way, we will see the early workers not as moaners but as heroes because they articulate the hurt of the exploited around the world.

So, does this parable tell us what the kingdom of God is like, or does it tell us what the kingdom of God is not like? What our society is like or what it should not be like. Work hard and you will get what you deserve, we are told. But who decides what you deserve? Only you can decide.