



The Methodist Church

Nottingham North East Circuit - Sunday 20th September 2020

This short act of worship, based on the service which would have been held at Church today, has been prepared for you by Rev John Wiseman , to use at home. If you are well enough, why not spend a few moments with God, knowing that other people are sharing this act of worship with you.

Let's begin by singing together a familiar favourite STF 416

There's a wideness in God's mercy,
Like the wideness of the sea;
There's a kindness in His justice,
Which is more than liberty.
There is no place where earth's sorrows
Are more felt than up in Heaven;
There is no place where earth's failings
Have such kindly judgment given.

But we make His love too narrow
By false limits of our own;
And we magnify His strictness
With a zeal He will not own.
There is plentiful redemption
In the blood that has been shed;
There is joy for all the members
In the sorrows of the Head.

For the love of God is broader
Than the measure of our mind;
And the heart of the Eternal
Is most wonderfully kind.
If our love were but more simple,
We should take Him at His word;
And our lives would be all sunshine
In the sweetness of our Lord.

Opening prayer: Psalm 145

I will extol you, my God and King, and bless your name forever and ever. ² Every day I will bless you, and praise your name forever and ever. ³ Great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised; his greatness is unsearchable.

⁴ One generation shall laud your works to another, and shall declare your mighty acts. ⁵ On the glorious splendor of your majesty, and on your wondrous works, I will meditate.

⁶ The might of your awesome deeds shall be proclaimed, and I will declare your greatness. ⁷ They shall celebrate the fame of your abundant goodness, and shall sing aloud of your righteousness.

⁸ The LORD is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. ⁹ The LORD is good to all, and his compassion is over all that he has made.

¹⁰ All your works shall give thanks to you, O LORD, and all your faithful shall bless you. ¹¹ They shall speak of the glory of your kingdom, and tell of your power, ¹² to make known to all people your mighty deeds, and the glorious splendor of your kingdom. ¹³ Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and your dominion endures throughout all generations.

The LORD is faithful in all his words, and gracious in all his deeds. ¹⁴ The LORD upholds all who are falling, and raises up all who are bowed down. ¹⁵ The eyes of all look to you, and you give them their food in due season.

¹⁶ You open your hand, satisfying the desire of every living thing. ¹⁷ The LORD is just in all his ways, and kind in all his doings. ¹⁸ The LORD is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth. ¹⁹ He fulfills the desire of all who fear him; he also hears their cry, and saves them. ²⁰ The LORD watches over all who love him, but all the wicked he will destroy.

²¹ My mouth will speak the praise of the LORD, and all flesh will bless his holy name forever and ever.

This morning's reading Matthew 20:1-16

"For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. ² After agreeing with the laborers

for the usual daily wage,^[a] he sent them into his vineyard.

³ When he went out about nine o'clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; ⁴ and he said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.' So they went.

⁵ When he went out again about noon and about three o'clock, he did the same. ⁶ 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?' ⁷ They said to him, 'Because no one has hired us.' He said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard.'

⁸ 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.' ⁹ When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage.^[b] ¹⁰ Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage.^[c] ¹¹ And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, ¹² 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.'

¹³ 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?'^[d] ¹⁴ Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. ¹⁵ Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?'^[e] ¹⁶ So the last will be first, and the first will be last."^[f]

Let's sing again....the tune is 'To God be the glory, great things he has done' but the new words pick up on the reading we have just heard

A man owned a vineyard and needed a crew
To tend to his land, there was plenty to do.
He called out to people downtown in the square,
"Come work hard all day and I'll pay you what's fair."

God, you call and you send; there is work here to do.

There's your whole world to tend; may we garden for you!

O Lord, in your vineyard may we seek to be
The workers who tend to your justice and peace.

He went back a number of times on that day;
He called to new workers and promised fair pay.

Can we but imagine those first workers' rage
When all those who laboured received the same wage?

God, the gift of your grace comes as quite a surprise.

For your mercies embrace even latecomers' lives.
May all who have worked long and hard humbly learn:

Your grace is a gift and not something we earn.

He called the complainers and said, "This is true —
That I kept my word and I gave you your due.

I share with compassion; I'm loving and kind.

I care for all people and give what is mine!"

God you give what is yours, more than what we deserve;

May we reach out in love where you call us to serve.

May we who have witnessed your grace gladly share

Your justice and love with your world everywhere.

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Today's message:

Today's story is as we might expect being from Matthew's gospel a very Jewish story. All through their faith history the vineyard has been used as an image of Israel. In Isaiah chapter 5 is one in which God is likened to a vineyard owner distressed that after all the care and love he has showered on the vine...on Israel, it continues to produce wild grapes instead of cultivated ones

And in John's gospel during the long discourse that Jesus has with his disciples on the night of Passover, Jesus talks about the vine and about only by remaining in it would they bear good fruit

So immediately the listeners of this tale would be able to make links with their own life predominantly agricultural, with their faith story, link that were probably much more obvious to them than to us now. Another reason to always try and grasp the context and cultural relevance of what any passage might have said to its original hearers

And yet I suspect as we listen to this tale 2000 years later there will be occasions when we react with as much surprise to what we here as the original listeners did back then, because although

Jesus is setting his story in a context with which everyone would be familiar, the way the story develops would be anything but familiar. Instead of the expected it will paint a picture of the upside down, inside out kingdom of God that Jesus is ushering in, kingdom that will be very different to those that have come before it.

I wonder for example if you have ever stopped to consider the strange behaviour of the employer, the landowner who offers the jobs for the day. Please note who it is who goes down to the village to look for people in need of employment. It is not a servant of the landowner's family; it is not a relative of the landowner's family...the landowner's brother or eldest son for example. No it is the landowner himself who goes to find willing workers, the landowner who makes the first move.

It is the landowner himself who goes out and not just the once but repeatedly throughout the day. Five times in fact...early in the morning, at the 3rd hour, the 6th hour, the 9th hour and the 11th hour.

It is the landowner who is concerned about the welfare and wellbeing of the villagers. It is the landowner who wants to give them gainful employment, who wants them as part of his team, who wants them to be rewarded. It is the landowner who makes the first move and makes it repeatedly. Not the behaviour of your usual run of mill employer down in rural Judah I shouldn't imagine. This is our first surprise of the day

Something that would not have been a surprise is why the village men were hanging around waiting to be hired. Many of them would be landless peasant, many of them would have had to sell their land during times of economic hardship, many of them would have been forced from their land for being unable to pay the high taxes demanded by the roman authorities, some of them would have experienced this situation of having to rely on other for work for many month, years generations. Standing in the market place would have been the equivalent of attending the local job center today. It was a day to day existence, living from hand to mouth, never sure of where the next day's meal might come from.

Perhaps some of them, the ones that were still waiting at the end of the day were simply there for despite there being work that needed doing, these men were simply the sort that no one wanted to hire. Better to have the work left undone than to hire this type of man. No one has wanted to hire us reply the men...it is not that they are not keen to work, it is that no one wants them.

And note that the land owner respects the desire of the people still gathered late in the day. They want to work, they do not want a handout, they do not want charity. And by offering them a chance to work even towards the end of the day the landowner shows great sensitivity towards both their physical needs and their self esteem.

Another surprise comes when they are paid at the end of the day which in itself was the normal practice, one instituted in Deuteronomy 24. What is surprising and something that causes delight and disgust in equal measure amongst the workers is that they are all paid the same....a denarius....a fair wage for a day's work...only of course some of the men have only worked a fraction of the day.

It is in fact the last to be hired who are paid first...yet another surprise...and when they receive a full denarius, not just a fraction of it, you can just imagine what they must have thought. You can also imagine what must have raced through the other workers minds....wow we must be about to get a fortune!

And the order of payment is important. If the ones who had worked longest had been paid first, chances are they would have happily gone on their way, not hung around to see what the rest of the workers were paid. If they had been paid first they would not have been present to learn the lesson that the landowner was about to teach them. A lesson that might be hard for them to understand but one which needed to be taught.

We hear nothing of how the intermediate three groups react only how the last group to be paid...those who have in fact worked a full day....when they too receive just a single denarius...a single denarius that a mere 12 hours earlier they thought was a wonderful wage for what they were being asked to do. Now however because of what has gone on before, now there is of course uproar.

And it is not that those who have been working all day are being underpaid....there was no argument coming from them when this amount was offered at the start of the day. And far from cheating the workers the landowner has in fact fulfilled the verbal contract that was agreed to the letter

He agreed to pay them a denarius; he has paid them a denarius. That was a fair days wage, perhaps it was much better than a fair days wage, hence their eagerness to start work for him in the first place. The landowner had not broken the law, in fact he had fulfilled the law to the letter...in fact he had gone way beyond it.

Yet you can just imagine the words that are, whispered under the breath, spoken or perhaps shouted at the landowner, as the foreman is perhaps pushed forward to argue the case...favouritism, idle, injustice, unfairness...and several other words and phrases I imagine that should not be uttered in a church or polite society.

But the landowner's answer is quite simple and to the point. You got what was promised, what you agreed upon...what's the problem? And secondly it's my money...can I not do with it what I want?

Far from being unfair, far from being a cheat, far from being a liar, the landowner is in fact showing incredible generosity and in this tale of rural employment practices in rural Judah, Jesus takes the accepted practices of the day and turns life upside down.

And the analogy that Jesus is trying to draw out is simple. Jesus is not offering the parable as an example of good agricultural management technique...indeed any landowner that tried employing this wage scheme would end up bankrupt within months.

The behaviour of the landowner is extremely odd. But isn't that often the case with Jesus parables...take something familiar but insert a sudden twist that the story will stick in the memories of those who hear it. And here we have it again....judged by human standards God is odd, God behaves in ways that we wouldn't, God doesn't always if ever do what we might expect.

And here Jesus illustrates that length of service and hours spent toiling in the heat of the day

constitute no claim on God and provide no reason to prevent God being generous to whom God chooses, to those who have worked less, to those who have come late to the party, to those who have only just seen the light, just heard the good news, only just believed.

Whilst some might be undeserving of the amount that they have received, all are indeed given this incredibly generous gift. All are on the same level. All will be treated in the same way whether they are simple fishermen, tax collectors, prostitutes, scribes, Pharisees or greats of faith such as Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. All will be treated the same irrespective of who they are...jews or gentiles, men or woman, free or slave. Human merit disappears before the grace of God for this is a parable about unconditional love rather than inflexible legalism.

Jesus comes to enable the transformation of individuals by shattering the status quo and demanding a complete reorganization of society from top to bottom. There are no rankings in the new kingdom of God. And here in this story we have an example set within the familiar lives of the original listeners where a sudden and unexpected twist reveals the gulf and distance between how this world operates and how things in the new kingdom of God are going to be.

The kingdom of God it seems is going to be nothing like we expect it to be. The norms of society are about to be reversed. Those whom we might think are not deserving, will be treated equally. Those who are in our eyes are to be dealt with last (if at all) will in God's eyes be treated first

It will be a kingdom in which no one can earn their place. No one can claim membership based on their own efforts. No one can automatically assume that they are in and others are out. No one can say that they are deserving whilst others are not.

It will be a kingdom not dependent on adherence to law but upon receiving the grace of God...about receiving something free of charge that we do not deserve and could never earn.

And for all of us....those of us who perhaps recognize we are like the workers who complain at this apparent injustice and those of us who feel

more like the workers no-one else wants to hire...the fact that this initiation to be participants in the kingdom of God is open to everyone must surely be the good news we and the world need to hear.

The idea that one will be rewarded based upon what you have done, what you have worked for, what one has earned is completely alien to the kingdom of God. There is nothing you can do to make God love you more, and thankfully there is nothing you can do to make God love you any less.

A kingdom where the greatest is the one who serves, where children are welcomed with open arms, where beggars are invited to banquets, where sinful women will have their names remembered for all time.

A kingdom where the norms and expectations of this world are turned upside, down, inside out and back to front. A kingdom where all will be equal, equality based on grace not graft

A kingdom where thankfully for you and for me...the last will finally be first. Amen

Prayers of Intercessions

We pray for...

The stories that have dominated our news headlines over the past week.

We pray for those churches in the circuit who have opened for worship and those in the process of doing so

We pray for our local community

For our church family

For those dear to us

And finally we join our voices to say The Lord's Prayer together...Our Father

Let's conclude this worship by singing STF 124

For the fruit of all creation,
Thanks be to God.

For His gifts to ev'ry nation,
Thanks be to God.

For the ploughing, sowing, reaping,
Silent growth while we are sleeping,
Future needs in earth's safe-keeping,
Thanks be to God.

In the just reward of labour,
God's will is done.

In the help we give our neighbour,
God's will is done.

In our world-wide task of caring
For the hungry and despairing,
In the harvests we are sharing,
God's will is done.

For the harvests of the Spirit,
Thanks be to God.

For the good we all inherit,
Thanks be to God.

For the wonders that astound us,
For the truths that still confound us,
Most of all, that love has found us,
Thanks be to God.

A blessing...

Go out into the field to labour in the name of Jesus, empowered by the Holy Spirit, to the glory and praise of God, who honours all who serve.