

Jesus makes me think ...

... He also makes me smile

A sermon given on the Fifteenth Sunday of Trinity, 20th September 2020, by the Curate, the Revd Tim Kelly, in the Minster.

Matthew 20:1-16

So I want to start by admitting to you two ways in which the words from today's gospel passage have affected me this week, as I've been thinking about them: Jesus makes me smile; Jesus makes me think. Firstly when I say Jesus makes me smile, I'm in no way saying that I'm laughing at Jesus. Instead, that smile is because I love the way in which he uses parables to communicate powerful truths, and because I love the way in which he can puncture through layers of our misunderstanding with just one story. So my smile is in part a smile of admiration - this is my leader and he's pretty cool. Secondly, as I suspect it must have been for those first hearing these words, Jesus really makes me think: think about myself, my attitudes and about how society operates.

So as I talk a bit more this morning about this parable, I hope you might join me in a bit of this smiling and in being challenged. You see, I think that people listening to this parable would have been enraged by this story. I think that's the point. Jesus did know what he was doing. "That's not fair! That's not fair!" would have been the retort. People should get a wage according to the work done; the trades union reps would be up in arms. I'm not surprised the workers were angry, people might say. Maybe their anger was the same kind of anger as the elder brother in the story of the prodigal son: "That's not fair. You never killed the fatted calf for me, Dad."

You see, we all may think we have a pretty good sense, a good intuition of what is right and what is wrong. We know how to call something out when we do not think it's right or not following the rules. Our current societal coronavirus restrictions come to mind, and it's interesting to see some of the anger that comes out in local discussion groups on Facebook when people feel that others aren't doing the right thing, when they're not following the rules. Our home secretary, Priti Patel, has even encouraged us to shop on our neighbours if we feel that they are breaking the rules. Of course, this all relies upon us having a pretty good sense of what is right and what is wrong; what is fair and what is not.

This is a cautionary tale from Jesus. It starts with the words, 'The Kingdom of Heaven is like this.' But it perhaps might as well have started with the words, 'You know, the kingdom

of heaven might not operate quite in the way that you would automatically expect.' And there are a number of things that would have seemed odd about this story.

Firstly, there is nobody else to blame other than the landowner for this rather strange pattern of hiring the workers. There's no intermediary as perhaps the crowd listening would have expected, who has somehow messed this up. It's the landowner himself who hires the initial workers, who then returns to the marketplace to hire more workers, and returns again to the marketplace to hire even more workers. And of course, in the end, it's the landowner that directs the workers to be paid: this is the man in charge and he knows exactly what he's doing.

Secondly, there's something very interesting about his trips to hire more workers, and it takes me back to my school days, perhaps not in a good way. Do you ever remember being asked to line up for PE or games, as two captains called you out one by one for their respective teams? Were you ever, like me, one of those people who was one of the last to be called? If you were, I'm sure you'd agree with me, it's not a very nice feeling. In Jesus's story, the landowner asks the labourers in the marketplace, "Why are you still here?" And the answer they give is, "Because no one has hired us." But perhaps this could have been paraphrased, "Because nobody else wanted us." You might think the landowner keeps going back to get more labourers because there is so much work to do. But it could also be it's because there were more labourers to be called: there are those who are otherwise on the fringes, otherwise not involved. The landowner is in the marketplace looking for anybody and everybody.

And then, of course, we get to the climax of the story, those wages:

Significantly towards the beginning of the story, the landowner simply told the extra labourers, I'll pay you whatever is right. But the big question, the difficult question is, what IS right? The landowner's sense of what is right appears different to the original workers who were hired for the entire day and what they were thinking. They were perhaps thinking, 'Look, you can either be fair or you can be generous - but on this occasion, you can't be both.' But the landowner refuses to see fairness and generosity being played off against each other this way. He has a different way of seeing things, a different way of calculating things. I'm reminded of Isaiah 55: "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor your ways, my way," says the Lord, "for as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts." Perhaps the biggest mistake here is thinking about these payments as normal wages: normal wages

would mean that the more work you do, the more you get paid. But, the kingdom of God isn't like that. It's not a meritocracy. We are not loved more or rewarded more according to what we do for God. Our relationship with God is less about wages in that normal sense, and more about a covenant. God has made a promise to us, and in return we make a commitment to him. We can't ask for, want for, or expect anything more; we can't ask for some kind of special deluxe edition of God's Covenant or 'Two portions of Covenant, please.'

There is one promise, one commitment for the offering and for the taking. And it's a pretty good deal. It's sometimes a pretty one sided deal in our favour. As Jesus's parable shows, no matter what the workers give him, he still wants to give the workers everything, the whole daily wage - this is another reason why this story makes me smile.

So where does that leave us today? Well, hopefully for you, as it does for me, the story challenges me when I might feel so confident in my own sense of what is right and what is wrong. Sometimes that thinking, that intuition, can be at odds with how things truly operate in the Kingdom of God; sometimes this makes me simply realise that I need to spend more time sitting at the foot of the master, learning and listening. And secondly, I hope as you leave this morning, this story makes you smile, smile with admiration for the one we follow, smile with hope for how things can and will be, and smile because we are not paid a wage by God, but instead we are on the receiving end of a covenant promise that extends to, and is offered to all.

Reading Text

Matthew 18:21-35

¹ "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, 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 laborers 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. ¹⁰ Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. 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? 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?" ¹⁶ So the last will be first, and the first will be last."