

The Last will be First ...

... and the First will be Last

A sermon given on the Sixteenth Sunday of Trinity, 24th September 2023 – by the Curate, the Revd Charlie Shefford, in Beverley Minster

Matthew 20:1-16

For the first thousand years or so of the Bible's history, it had no chapters and no verses. In the 13th century, Archbishop of Canterbury, Stephen Langton, divided the Bible up into chapters, which are the chapter divisions we still use today. I say this because our reading today opens with probably the worst chapter break in the whole of Scripture. And it is because of this, that it is necessary to begin this sermon by looking at the end of the previous chapter, chapter 19.

Today's parable occurs in the fallout of Jesus's words to the rich young man who asks Jesus, *"Teacher, what good deeds must I do to have eternal life?"* Jesus replies, *"Why do you ask me about what is good?"* There is one who is good, namely God alone. And he tells the rich young man, *"Sell your possessions and give the money to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven. Truly, I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for one who is rich to enter the kingdom of Heaven."*

He then clarifies that though by human means this would be impossible, for God all things are possible, even a rich person entering heaven. So Peter begins to put the pieces together and doesn't like what he's hearing. Wait a minute, Peter says, we left everything to follow you, Jesus, but we could have kept everything all along. What extras do we get in return? Jesus makes it clear that no one who follows him will lose out, all will inherit eternal life. But this isn't enough for Peter. He thinks the apostles deserve a little bit more, a bit more than everyone else, especially those who haven't given up as much as them. Jesus tells him, *"Many who are first will be last, and the last will be first."* And then, to explain these words, Jesus begins today's parable, which moves us to chapter 20, today's Gospel: *"For the Kingdom of Heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire labourers for his vineyard."* We'll return to this at the end, but it's an interesting point and worth reflecting on that this parable was traditionally read on the first Sunday the church prepared for Lent and for the great Lenten fast. Its purpose was to teach an important lesson to those who were thinking too highly of themselves for all they would give up in Lent, similar to Peter's thinking at the end of the previous chapter.

Now, after agreeing with the labourers for a denarius for the day, he sent them into his vineyard - a denarius was a fair day's pay for a day of work. And then the landowner goes into the market again about 3 hours after his first visit and hires more labourers who he sends into his vineyard. And then he does this again at noon, again at 3pm, and a final time at 5pm, an hour before the working day is over. Then the evening arrives and the landowner asks his manager to call in the labourers and give them their pay and instructs the manager, in words reminiscent of Jesus's own, to begin with the last and then go to the first. The landowner gives a full day's pay to those who arrive last and have only done one hour's work. Those who arrive first and have been working since dawn assume they will be getting more than a full day's pay - not an unreasonable assumption, many of us I'm sure would think. But they too received the same amount of a denarius, the sum they had agreed to. And they begin to grumble, protesting that they have not been treated fairly and complaining to the landowner that he has made the late comers equal to them. In other words, they were not only dissatisfied with what they themselves had received, they were also envious of what had been given to the others.

I'm sure many of us instinctually feel a sense of unfairness about the situation. But why? The landowner has done nothing wrong. He's given the original labourers what he promised and of his own generosity has given the same for the late comers. If God chooses to be utterly gracious towards us, who are we to object? The landowner replies, "*Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me or are you envious because I am good?*"- Because I am good - we're right back to the rich young man: there is one who is good - God, and he demonstrates his goodness by giving the same gift to all without regard to effort or work, that is the gift of life without end.

Peter was worried the disciples might be getting ripped off. He thought it wasn't fair. And though the agreement was fair, fairness is not central to God's dealings with us. More important is the goodness and generosity of God. And that is what today's parable emphasises. And because of God's goodness, the last will be first and the first will be last.

And so we end as we began, the topsy-turvy way of God's working, to the astonishment of Peter and to us all. So what if God chooses to be good and generous and give us what we don't at all deserve? Can we grumble? Can we fault him? No, we cannot.

At the beginning I said this gospel was usually read on the Sunday the Church began preparing for the great Lenten fast. It was also at the conclusion of Lent on Easter Day that this gospel was read. John Chrysostom, the '*Golden Mouth*', fourth century preacher, wrote a homily inspired by this passage, and it is still read out in many churches on Easter today. I've cut down the homily he wrote, as much as I could, because I thought it was too good not to include.

So it reads:

"Whoever may be spent from fasting, enjoy now your reward; whoever has toiled from the first hour, receive today your just settlement; if any came after the third hour, celebrate gratefully; if any of you arrived after the 6th hour, have no misgivings - you have lost nothing; if some have been as late as the 9th, come forward, do not be at loss; if any of you have arrived only at the 11th hour, do not be dismayed for being late. The Master is gracious: He accepts the last even as the first; He gives rest to those of the 11th hour as well as to those who have laboured from the first; He is lenient with the last while looking after the first; to the one he gives freely, to the other he gives; He accepts the labours and welcomes the effort, honours the deed and praises the offering. So all of you enter into the joy of our Lord: first and second, share the bounty; rich and poor alike celebrate together; sober or heedless, honour the day; those who fasted and those who did not, rejoice today. The table is full. Everyone ate sumptuously. The calf is fatted. No one will go away hungry."

In other words, it's not about us. It's not about what we sacrifice or give up for Christ. When we place the emphasis on following Jesus, on all the many and wonderful ways in which we can most piously serve and sacrifice, we make following Jesus not about Him, but about ourselves, congratulating ourselves on all the times and ways in which we have served Christ, judging our brothers and sisters in Christ when we feel they haven't quite served or sacrificed for Christ quite as well as we have.

Following Jesus, we celebrate joyously God's free, wonderful and gracious goodness. For whether we are first or last, it is only ever by his freely given goodness and grace that we are saved and, fortunately for us, not by a tally of whether we have served and sacrificed enough.

Reading Text

Matthew 20:1-16

For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire labourers for his vineyard. ² After agreeing with the labourers 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 market-place; 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. 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.'