

Sunday 24 September 2023
Sixteenth Sunday after Trinity

Liverpool Parish Church

OT: Jonah 3.10-4.11

NT: Philippians 1.21-30

Gp: Matthew 20.1-16

One of the tropes of British television and cinema from the 1950s until the 1970s was the implication that employees would try and get away with doing as little work as possible. The joke didn't really change between the 1959 film 'I'm alright, Jack' and the 1971 film 'Carry on at your convenience', but the theme was evident in plenty of other productions, such as 'On the buses', which ran on ITV between 1969 and 1973 and spawned three 'spin-off' feature films. I don't think I am old enough to understand whether or not the ambition not to work in these films connected with the way that people in this country actually behaved, or whether it was a comic trope offering an idealised vision of getting paid for doing nothing. As a comedy device it began to disappear in the 1980s and we might speculate about whether it seemed out of step with the political and economic revolution of the time. Union legislation, and the end of the concept of a 'job for life' changed the way that work environments were portrayed in popular entertainment, and the sharpening nature of comedy and satire consigned some of this to the past.

Of course our attitudes to work are always going to depend on what sort of work we do. If you ask the question 'do you work to live or live to work' then the answers are likely to be related to the sort of employment you have. The work in today's Gospel was hard manual labour, and the indignation felt by those who worked all day for the same pay as those who worked for an hour is entirely understandable. The landowner treats his workers demonstrably unfairly, and at the end of the parable the landowner says, "Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?"

But despite this unfairness, we can see the point that Jesus is trying to make in this parable. It is something about grace and salvation, reinforcing a message in our reading from the Old Testament. We pick up the story after Jonah had escaped God's calling to go and tell the people of Nineveh to repent; he had fled, ended up in the sea, been swallowed by a whale and burped back up again. Jonah realised he had better do the task allotted, and so he went to tell the people of Nineveh that they would be

destroyed and then in today's passage we heard that at that point they repented, at which point God decided not to destroy them. Jonah was a bit put out by this, but God showed him through the sudden appearance and disappearance of a bush that he is at will to make these decisions out of compassion for the people they affect.

This is a great reflection on God's power to save and the way that salvation is a gift and not a right. But like many of the parables in the Gospel, there is something unhealthy about it which doesn't quite reflect our relationship with God. It is a parable which is about working for a reward which is given in the end, but this is not the doctrine of grace and salvation which we are taught. Much of Matthew's Gospel is about moving away from the Law as a means of salvation. In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus does not discard the Law of Moses, and he states this explicitly in saying, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfil. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished." (Matthew 5.17f). But he does try to move our understanding from saying that complying with the ritualistic processes of the Law are the means of salvation: rather, the Law is fulfilled when you surrender yourself to doing God's will. In other words, you live to work, not work to live.

Our understanding of grace is rooted in the Bible, and we see it in countless stories, such as our readings today, as the loving kindness of God freely bestowed on his creation. It is not equated with 'fairness' as we have seen, and this is evident in other stories, such as the story of the Prodigal Son in Luke's Gospel, where the older brother is put out that the errant boy is greeted with celebration when he returns, despite having treated their father badly. It is another example of God's loving kindness. By the time the Christian Church develops a proper theology of grace, we see the complexities being teased out, and in particular the separation of nature and grace. If grace – God's salvific loving kindness – is only bestowed upon some people, then it is unfair and unloving and incompatible with the nature of God. If God's grace is bestowed upon all people then it is part of our nature through creation, and therefore not an *ex gratia* gift. This paradox has occupied theologians for many centuries and there are, of course, various different ways of developing a new understanding of grace.

What does seem clear from this morning's parable of the labourers in the vineyard is that the offer of God's grace is made to all. There was no discrimination when the landowner went to the market place to hire labourers, and anyone who was there was brought into the fold. Where the parable is less successful is the image of working in order to receive the reward. This seems to sit at odds with the biblical testimony. That trope of British comedy with which we began plays with the idea of reward without work, and of course that is the whole point: the comedy is in the unexpected reversal of work and reward. However, this is exactly the point of grace: the expectation of work and reward are reversed and undermined in grace, because grace is freely given.

However, what is given is not necessarily received, and this is the consequence of the offer of grace. This is, to my mind, what separates grace from nature, and illustrates that they are not the same. The acceptance of grace becomes the moment of salvation, not as a result of 'work' and the achievement of ritual processes, but the existential understanding and acceptance of grace in our lives. This is the point of connection between baptismal grace, sacramental grace, and all the other moments when we talk about grace. It is through the acceptance of grace that we are called to participate in the outward manifestation of grace in the world.

The parable of the labourers in the vineyard is difficult because it doesn't feel quite right, and it clearly sits at odds with some of the biblical images of salvation. However, it is also a profound illustration of the indiscriminate gift of grace and the moment of struggle which some have in accepting it. The labourers at the end of the story want salvation to be something which is earned and they begin to push against it, but salvation is something which is offered for us to receive. Our challenge is to accept that offer without fighting it off.

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