

Jesus' Teaching: Fruitful Labour

Sunday 20th September 2020

Readings: Psalm 105: 1-6, 37-45, Exodus 16: 2-15, Matthew 20: 1-16, Philippians 1: 21-30

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Having concluded our sojourn into the Epistle to the Romans we now segue smoothly into considering some of Jesus' teachings from the gospel of Matthew. Continuing the theme of the practical application of faith we come to Jesus' parable of the Workers in the Vineyard. The parable takes on a whole new perspective and intensity in the light of Covid-19 and the position in which the world and New Zealand finds itself. With rapid rises in unemployment, government provision of basic needs and attempts to find or make work, the fears of young and old about being able to find any work and great uncertainty about very practical aspects of the future this parable is highly relevant.

To understand this parable, we have first of all to place ourselves in the world and mindset of the early New Testament period and in particular, in the context of Judaic society. For Jesus and His contemporaries, life had a variety of obligations: to God, to family, to the community, and to the foreigner, stranger and sojourner in the land. In line with the promises made to the Patriarchs the people anticipated that God would bless faithfulness and obedience. He would also bring about punishment and correction when the nation and its people lost its way and followed different paths. The God of Exodus was majestic and just. He could bring the people out of captivity with a powerful hand, executing impossible miracles and bending the will of even the greatest world leaders like the Pharaohs. God could similarly miraculously water and feed hundreds of thousands of people, out in the desert, where there was no obvious significant food or water source. This is the God who Cares.

By Jesus' time the common erroneous understanding of many was that the rich were rich because of God's blessing and the poor were so because God had removed his Hand of blessing from them because of their sin, or worse, was actively punishing them. We are reminded of this in the narrative of the man born blind in John 9 and the disciples' question, "**Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?**". The understanding of a person's poor outcome in life was perceived as being due to their being under a curse because of something they or their parents had done.

In contrast those God blessed had an obligation to care for the community, starting with their families and extended to those of every level of society. Deuteronomy 15:7-10, for example, states, "**If anyone is poor among your fellow Israelites in any of the towns of the land the Lord your God is giving you, do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward them. Rather, be openhanded and freely lend them whatever they need.**" Rules towards foreigners and the whole system of the Jubilee forgiveness of debt is an expression of this level of care. The beloved story of Ruth and Boaz, in the Old Testament Book of Ruth, begins with the destitute foreigner Ruth gleaning the leftovers of the harvest from Boaz's field. In this and many other ways Jewish Law demanded that provision be made for those worse off, even strangers and foreigners, aliens in the land. This was not just a duty, rather it was to be understood as proper stewardship of all that God provided. Thus, wealth was not personal but an entrustment. But more on that in a couple of weeks. What is important here is the recognition that caring for people is high on God's agenda and this places obligations on all of us. With this in mind we turn to the parable.

In times and places when there is no system of social welfare or formal community support of the unemployed, elderly, the sick and disabled life is tough. It was then and it continues to be so in many countries of the world today. At the moment in many countries around the world people of all walks of life are finding themselves without work and income when they would ever in their wildest dreams imagined that something like this would happen to them. In many places as the news shows us long queues form for unemployment benefits and social assistance, food and clothing. Even here in New Zealand. Imagine what it would be like if this type of support was not available. Such was Jesus' world. Those capable of working would

line up and sit and wait at places where people would come to get temporary workers. If they were fortunate, they might be able to earn enough for at least a meal for themselves and their family. I have seen such workers in Africa; long queues of people, sitting waiting in the hot sun all day, hoping for just some work, any work, anything.

Jesus starts the parable by saying, **“The Kingdom of Heaven is like...”**. Unlike the other gospel writers, Matthew, writing to a predominantly Jewish audience, avoids using the name ‘God’ so he writes of the Kingdom of Heaven some thirty times in his gospel. The other use the ‘Kingdom of God’ so we can use the terms interchangeably. Irrespective, teaching on this Kingdom is the primary theme of much of both John the Baptist and Jesus’ ministries and preaching. So often this Kingdom turns the things of the world on its head so when Jesus starts this way we can normally expect to see some common world practice challenged. His Kingdom calls for humility rather than pride, sacrifice rather than acquisition, trust rather than self-confidence, and considers the heart rather than achievements ... to name a few.

Jesus next introduced the landowner who is the primary subject of the parable. As in many of Jesus’ parables the key character is to be understood as a man or woman of God acting as they should, or even God Himself. When a person of faith acts as they should they are a signpost to the world to the one they believe in. The landowner goes out early in the morning to hire workers. This then is the beginning of understanding fruitful labour. Jesus seems well versed in the practical skills of the land. Crops just don’t happen, they take significant work, especially in pre-industrial times and places. The landowner takes his responsibilities seriously. He plans ahead. He gets up early to get to the labour market so that the work on the land can begin as soon as possible. This would be about 6am our time. Also, the ground is easier to dig and it is more pleasant to work before the heat of the day. At the market he finds fit and able workers keen to do a day’s work and earn a full day’s pay. He agrees their wage at the normal, fair, expected rate and all is well. But then he returns, at 9am, at noon, even at 3pm in the afternoon and finds workers that have not yet found employment and he sets them to work as well. No doubt this generates a great degree of joy. All of these workers will have something to contribute to the family income. Every bit helps. In hard times even the young people, fit and able, were sent out to work. Everyone who contributes can. This too was the expectation set out in 2 Thessalonians 3:10 in blunt terms, **“The one who is unwilling to work shall not eat.”** These workers wanted to eat but could they get work? Through the generosity of the landowner they would get something at least. In the very hiring of workers through and late into the day this landowner is exceptional. By the end of the day the ones not hired were most likely to be the older, the least able, the crippled, the weak, those normally overlooked by society and pushed past by their fitter, stronger colleagues. Yet these too are hired. If the parable had stopped there it would have said something significant about the landowner and the Kingdom of Heaven in God’s stewardship, His pro-active looking for and engaging every person with His provision. But there was more.

At the end of the day the workers were paid. In every time and country this has always been a dangerous time. Large amounts of cash made the possibility of attacks, robbery, even murder a possibility. In some countries this is still the case as some people I know have experienced. Disgruntled and unhappy employees could become a physical threat to the employer so most deputised the work to others so they didn’t have to face the workers. In Jesus parable the situation is different. The employer himself comes to meet and thank the workers and starting with those employed last he begins to pay them. To everyone’s astonishment those employed only in the last hour are paid a normal full day’s pay of one denarius. The immediate response is what we see today with many people every time a political policy announcement is made: they quickly set to work calculating what they will make out of the policy personally rather than considering the wider situation. The workers employed at the start of the day, along with the rest, start calculating how much they are going to make. But things don’t go as they expect. The next group of workers are paid the same and the next until the first employed present themselves for payment. They too receive a denarius, far less

than they had calculated. And, no surprise here, they begin to grumble and complain. You can hear them can't you.... the perpetual complaint, "It's not fair ...", "I had to work so much harder ..." and on it goes. The focus is on self. Yet, as the employer pointed out, they contracted themselves for the agreed amount and were paid in full. They had no basis for complaint. Rather they should consider what the landowner has done. Seeing real need in the community he has met that need. Not as a handout; the workers still had to make themselves available and to work hard in the time they had available. They had no expectation of anything above and beyond what they deserved. The owner knew what the workers needed, what their families needed and that was his concern. It was not their fault they couldn't do better, they had all equally presented themselves for work but not all were so blessed or connected, as ability equipped to present themselves yet their needs were the same. The owner has responded with generosity to those in need, was their something wrong or unfair in that? No, in fact the exact opposite. What those who moaned revealed was a personal selfish focus and a lack of care for those around them. But, irrespective, each worker had received the due fruit of their labour and some more-so because of the graciousness and compassion of the owner.

The lesson here applies to us both as workers and as people in positions of power. On one hand we are called to have a eye for compassion for those around us. The fruit of our labour is not just be what we earn, the power and influence we exert but how we impact the society about us with our care and concern. Parables such as this fly in the face of a capitalism that has no social conscience and personal advancement at the expense of others. On the other hand, everyone is challenged to do what they can, to make themselves available and to take up the opportunities you are given no matter how menial they might seem. The workers were paid because they were there. They hadn't given up. Hard it must have been to wait until the last hour of the work day hoping for something. God so respects and blesses perseverance and diligence. Here again these characteristics are recognised and rewarded.

Colossians 3:23-34 reads, **"Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving."** This is the essence of our work as Christians. In Romans we discovered that all of our life is worship. Here it is similar. Our work, our practical day to day engagements, is done as to the Lord, for the Lord. That might be a significant mind-shift for us. We tend to think of what we need to achieve to pay the bills, service the mortgage, health bills, feed and clothe the kids, pay for their education and so on. We all know how endless that list can be. In all of this practicality we are called to be working for God with an enthusiasm and attitude that reflects we are serving God first. Therefore, the way we work, the way we deal with other people, the integrity by which we act, all speak of the One we serve. Unlike Cain, who when God asked after his brother responded with, **"I don't know ... am I my brother's keeper?"** we accept our social responsibility to others. We do have a duty of care to those around us. The fruit of our labour in serving God is by serving our family, our brothers, sisters and the wider community.

We might also note from Colossians 3:24 and the reality of the parable, that when our focus is correct, we receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. Not just what we deserve or might rightly expect but a reward, a blessing, an unexpectedly positive surprise. This is because God loves to reward faithfulness, not that we should expect it, or the timing of it, but because we know our Heavenly Father loves us and that's His nature.

What then can we conclude: Firstly, our God is a loving God who intimately knows the situation of His people. He loves to respond when called upon. Secondly, all of life is lived as worship and service for God, including our labours, and we have an obligation to care. This is a true fruit of our labour. How we do this will vary according to our situation, our gifts and abilities, but that we do it, is incumbent upon all. We are called to look beyond our own needs and wants. And thirdly, God loves to bless extravagantly those who make themselves available and do His work in lesser and greater ways, out of His generosity. So, go for it! Serve God, make your labour truly fruitful and see what happens. Amen