Matthew 20 1-16

As I read this parable I began to wonder, does the parable represent any hidden message other than the simple story in the text? Usually there is some complexity to the way the biblical text (and perhaps parables in particular) may be interpreted. This one is in fact a biblical text expressed as a parable that stirs our emotions about fair play.

In this parable (found only in Matthew) Jesus told the story of the landowner and the hired workers, and it has an unexpected and surprising ending. Five groups of labourers were involved, coming to the vineyard at different times of the day to work. When they gathered to be paid, they all received the same wage, regardless of how long they had worked.

As a parable, the passage shares classic elements found elsewhere in the Gospels. It is constructed with everyday circumstances and contains recognisable characters. It lays out a common-sense progression of one’s expectations, and then brings a twist to the tale at the end, leaving the listener perhaps with a sense of violated logic and disorientation. So, in this conclusion, all of us, both as readers and listeners, and as the people who are the hired hands for the work of the vineyard, are standing before the landowner, who appears to be trying to teach us something vital about our life expectations.

In times of harvest the owners need a workforce to gather the produce. It is a colossal amount of work in a very short period of time. The work is seasonal, and uncertain. A seasonal worker picks up work where they can. It sort of works, because apples might be picked at a different time from grapes, and success can be weather dependant. It is actually jolly hard work and suitable for young people. As such, I would be more likely to volunteer for seasonal work being employed as Father Christmas. The wonderful conditions of service for that job include 49 weeks holiday. In recent years, we here in New Zealand have faced other difficulties with a labour shortage during the complications inflicted on us by our response to the Covid pandemic where it was difficult for transient workers to come here.

The story referred to by Matthew was the time of grape harvest when the owner of the vineyard needed such a seasonal workforce of labourers to gather in the grapes. He went to the marketplace, where he would typically find people seeking employment. At the beginning of the day, he employed some with the agreement that they would receive the nominal daily wage of a denarius. This was a roman silver coin, worth 10 bronze coins known as asses. As the day went on, he returned four times and hired more people each time.

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.  When those hired about five o’clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage.  Having worked only one hour they may have been surprised to receive a full day’s pay. Those who had worked right through the day expected to receive more than those who had worked only one hour, and when they received it, they grumbled that these last people had worked only one hour and had been made equal to those who had borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.

This sense of unfairness that this feeling brings is reminiscent of the one generated in Luke’s Gospel as we stand in the field with the elder brother of the returned prodigal son. There are sounds of a party in progress. His natural reaction was, what is going on here? This is not fair. The brothers’ reaction could be due to a perceived violation of this long-term loyalty to his father. Likewise, in this story, the reaction of the workers in the vineyard created a similar sense of injustice.

What Jesus was trying to communicate was this: The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner, who we discover as the story unfolds, is also an employer. As in most of Jesus’ parables, the manner of governance in heaven is revealed by some likeness that we can identify or imagine in our own everyday life. It does not portray a likeness between the realm of heaven and the landowner’s estate, but it accents similarity of our God, to the behaviour of this landowner.

The point of the parable lies in the interplay between some worker’s sense of their due reward and the generosity. They viewed the extravagance of the act as increasingly discriminate, because in their eyes, it made them the late comers equal to those who had worked longer.

The employer pointed out that they had no reason to be envious, as reward for work was his right and his decision. At this point, I imagine the atmosphere to be extremely tense, because the noted generosity was viewed by some of the workers as increasingly discriminatory.

OK, a tad bizarre, but is there a message in the parable of the workers in the harvest? Are we supposed to have inspiration from the parable? Is there a moral lesson for us?

The owner’s response was that he was doing no wrong. Actually, that is the shortest definition of ethics, that is – do no wrong. He reminded those who had worked longest and presumably in their opinion, worked the hardest for him, that they had all agreed to work for a denarius.  He said quite firmly, take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you.  Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?”

Nowadays, the general public is not going to buy that, a hired hand might simply reach for a mobile phone and call the union representative out to the vineyard. But Jesus, by means of the parable, was not teaching his people about the right relationships between employers and employees, proper working conditions stipulated by OSH or disputing the government stipulated minimum rates of pay. Instead, the story is intended to teach us all something about the kingdom of heaven, about the way God deals with people in his kingdom.

It appears that the intended interpretation of the parable is that people can come to, not the vineyard but to faith in God at different points in their lives. Those who convert to Christianity late in life earn equal rewards along with those who converted early. Just as the vineyard owner was generous with his late-comers, God is equally generous. Some people are lifelong disciples of Jesus, and some people convert only toward the end of their lives. In the kingdom of God, both groups are treated the same. The parable can also be interpreted to mean that even the people who embrace Christianity early in life should not feel more special than those who are converts later in their lives.

The parable follows closely on the heels of chapter 19 where Jesus said, but many who are first will be last and those last will be first. In the context of the parable, the terms last and first are temporal, not hierarchical. It is not about who ranks higher or lower, it is also not about who comes earlier or later, and who follows longer or more briefly. The whole point of this parable is a vivid illustration that we are all equal recipients of God’s gifts. It would indeed be disrespectful to our faith if we are covetous and jealous when God’s gifts of forgiveness and life are given to others in equal measure as were the workers in the parable who had worked all day. Consequently, it seems that the purpose of the story is to encompass understanding of God’s love for us all.

This is a parable about the kingdom of heaven that shows His disciples that God welcomes and rewards all who come to him in faith, whenever that faith may have begun in their lives. It is made clear that it is never too late to begin living faithfully. My right to God’s grace just because I was born and brought up in a Christian family is no greater than someone who only found faith in Jesus as an adult, and even in late adult years. It is God’s grace, mercy, and forgiveness, that are God’s to give away as he sees fit and not our place to determine who is more or less worthy of receiving it.

Amen