

Sermon 20 September 2020

Matthew 20:1-16

This parable describes the kind of thing that frequently happened at certain times in Palestine. If the grape harvest was not gathered in before the rains broke, then it was ruined. So any worker was welcome, even if he could give only an hour's work.

The pay was very low, as in very low. The men who were standing in the market-place were not street-corner idlers, lazing away their time. The market-place was the equivalent of the labour exchange. A man came there first thing in the morning, waiting for someone to hire him. The fact that some of them were still waiting around until five o'clock in the late afternoon is proof of how much they wanted the work.

These men were hired labourers. They were the lowest class of workers and life for them was precarious. Slaves and servants were regarded as being at least to some extent attached to the family; they were within the group; their fortunes were tied to the fortunes of the family, but they would never be in danger of starvation in normal times. IT was very different for the hired workers. They were ultimately at the mercy of chance employment. Their pay was minimal. If they were unemployed for a day, their family would go hungry.

There are a multitude of lessons in this parable. Let's focus on a couple. And let's begin with the last verse – *'And so it is, that many who are first now will be last then, and those who are last now will be first then.'* It is a verse that expresses a recurring theme in the teaching of Jesus – the issue of humility.

It is in one sense, a warning to the disciples. It is as if Jesus said to them, 'You will have received the great privilege of coming into the Christian church and fellowship very early on, right at the beginning. In later days others will come in. You must not claim a special honour and a special place because you were Christians before they were. All people, no matter when they entered the fold, are equally precious to, God.'

There is also a definite warning to the Jews. They knew they were the chosen people, and consequently they looked down on the Gentiles, quite severely. This attitude threatened to be carried forward into the Christian Church. Jesus is saying that in God's community there is no such thing as a most favoured nation clause. As Christians, we are all equal.

This parable is also about the generosity of God. These men did not all do the same work, but they did receive the same pay. All service ranks the same with God. If we give what we can, however we may give it, we will be blessed. And this leads on to the point I really want to make about this parable. A person cannot be a genuine Christian if their first concern is pay; or put in a different way, if their concern is what is in it for them.

In other words, our prime concern must be how can I improve the lot of others through what I do? This should be our mission – to touch the lives of others through our work,

through our voluntary efforts, through using whatever gifts we might have. I remind you of that wonderful verse, 1 John 3:18 – *‘Dear friends, let us stop just saying we love each other; let us really show it by our actions.’* That must be our mission – to find ways by which we can bring a little light, a little love into the lives of others. Let me tell you a story of how one person found his mission.

It is the story of Johnny the bagger. Johnny had Down Syndrome and he worked at a grocery supermarket. One day Johnny went to a training event led by a speaker named Barbara Glantz. Barbara was speaking on how people can make a difference. She described how every interaction with another person is a chance to bless someone’s life. She talked about how important it is to look for those moments. She placed on the wall posters with inspiring sayings.

Johnny had an idea. He decided that every night when he came home from work he would find a ‘thought for the day’ for his next shift. It would be something positive, some reminder of how much people matter, or how many gifts we are surrounded by.

Every night his dad would help him enter the saying several times on a page on the computer, then he would print off 50 pages. He then would take a pair of scissors and carefully cut out 300 copies and sign every one.

Johnny put the stack of pages next to him while he worked. Each time he finished bagging someone’s groceries, he would put his saying on top of the last bag. Then he would look at the person straight in the eye and say, ‘I’ve put a saying in your bag. I hope it helps you have a good day. Thanks for coming here.’

After about a month, an amazing thing was happening at the grocery supermarket. The line at Johnny’s checkout each day was three times longer than anyone else’s. The manager got on the loudspeaker to get more checkout lines moving, but he couldn’t get any of his customers to move. They said, ‘It’s ok. We’ll wait. We want to be on Johnny’s line.’

A few months later the whole shopping centre was transformed because every shop initiated little gestures that impacted on their customers in a very positive way, gestures that made them feel good and special. The shopping centre was inundated with customers and business boomed. And all this happened through the initiative of Johnny the bagger.

What Johnny did was not rocket science. He didn’t have super gifts but he cared and he found a way to use his job to make a difference in the lives of others. It’s about motive, isn’t it? If our motives are aligned with our Christian ethics, then we will make a difference for the good.

So the message for us is that wherever we are, whatever we are doing, we must live in a way that brings credit to the title of Christian. In the end, it is simply doing what Christ calls us to do, and in doing so, we cement our relationship with him.