



Sermon preached by Revd Nigel Uden on Sunday 20 September 2020

Readings: Matthew 20.1-16; Jonah 3.10-4.11; Philippians 1.21-30

As I did last week, I begin by wondering what religion's place is, if it does not make a difference – if faith in Jesus Christ doesn't add something to life, to improve it; to redefine life, to change it. After all, despite all its marvellous beauty and nobility, it's not as if life as we know it is not ripe for some change and improvement. Sir David Attenborough's most recent documentary about the current extinction of species proceeding at one hundred times the natural rate, surely alerts us to the fact that not every aspect of the *status quo* is either sustainable or desirable.

Moreover, one way of understanding Matthew's Gospel, from which we just heard Judy read, is that it is 'a manual of instruction in the Christian way of life',¹ pointing readers to explore how they might live as God intends when sending Jesus Christ. Seen that way, the Bible is not intended to leave readers where it finds them. To borrow St Paul's word to the Philippians, it inspires us 'to live our lives in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ'.

Such is today's Gospel reading. As Susan Durber helps us see, although it might be 'an extended narrative metaphor about the grace of God' she can't stop herself 'being challenged by this as a story about work and pay, about bosses and workers.'² At the moment, work is one of the threads running through the story of the pandemic: those for whom it means working harder and more riskily than ever, not least key workers of various sorts; those for whom it means redundancy as the economy is so markedly affected; those for whom being exploited or abused at work is a commonplace, particularly in workplaces that may be abroad geographically but which feed into our nation's economy and thereby into our own daily lives.

Because work is as hot a topic today as ever it was, could there be something in this parable for Christian thinkers to offer into the public discourse – something that will make a difference to how we order society and enable abundant living?

When John Ruskin was writing his controversial papers on wealth, which were published in the 1860s, he borrowed from this morning's Gospel passage, to entitle them *Unto This Last*.³ In this parable of workers in the vineyard, we meet a landowner who is clearly skilled and efficient. He is running a business that seems to be thriving and productive. Why else would he need people to harvest a crop than that he had successfully grown one? So we might legitimately assume he is a knowledgeable vine-grower, a reasonable businessman, a careful

¹ Beare, Francis Wright 1981 *The Gospel according to Matthew* Oxford: Blackwell page 5

² Durber, Susan 2013 *Surprised by Grace* London: Granary/URC page 65

³ Ruskin, John 1860, 1862 *Unto this last*

manager and wise strategist. But despite all those valuable characteristics, he is not quite what people expect.

Those Johnny-come-latelys who rock up at teatime are paid as much as the workers who have busied themselves from before breakfast. Ruskin hears the landowner make a vital point when he says to those who arrived first thing, and at night received *nothing less* than the amount he promised, 'I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you'. Or as the Authorised Version has it, 'Take that thine is, and go thy way: I will give *unto this last*, even as unto thee.'

Of course, it's not beyond the wit of modern people to understand why those who had worked all day were annoyed when those they saw as idlers got the same amount as they did. It only takes a pretty basic sense of natural justice to share their indignation. Indeed, we *ought* to share their indignation, when we see people treated unfairly by those with power over them. And let our indignation be an active thing that thrusts us into campaigning tirelessly for justice until it is everyone's lived experience. But whatever else the landowner was, do we not do well to note that he was *honest*, defrauding none and scrupulously keeping his word to the larks. He was also kind, noting that the indigent needed as much as the indignant, and therefore giving them what he discerned would help.

I wonder if it is that honesty which particularly impressed Ruskin, so that he took that phrase from the Gospel to entitle his papers on wealth. He writes: 'whatever else we have lost faith in, there shall be no question, but assuredly we have lost faith in common honesty, and in the working power of it.'⁴ And he goes on to call for honesty in those who lead in order to draw the best out of those who are led.

At all levels of life – home life, community life, national life, and international life - 2020 is challenging. We are all having to re-think what makes society tick and thrive. Some of us are caught up in running the country and in negotiating its international relations; some of us are running organisations severely affected, maybe disastrously affected, by Covid-19; and some of us have been enduring that home-working and home-schooling, or that prolonged isolated living, which means so much has altered that we easily feel disorientated. And then there are the cancers, divorces and bereavements that are more personally redefining what our lives are.

Into all of those fragile contexts, might this landowner be breathing a radical approach that profoundly values the truly essential technological expertise, scientific progress, management skill and even the political cut and thrust, and complements them with the absolute imperative of honesty and kindness?

In truth, I am not really persuaded that his treating everyone exactly the same, when some might have done nine times more work than others, was designed to get the best out of the workforce – and in that sense perhaps this parable *is* better understood as 'an extended narrative metaphor about the grace of God', for that assuredly *does* come to those who don't deserve it – me, and you included. But if we take the sentiment and morals of the landowner as the aspects to consider, then perhaps, with Ruskin, we can find in this parable building blocks for a stable and prosperous society, which even as it expects much from us also offers much to us.

⁴ Ruskin, *Unto this last*, Preface.

Uniquely amongst the gospel writers, Matthew includes this parable as part of that manual of instruction for the Christian life. It affirms the place of business at the heart of society, it addresses the unavoidable challenges of relationships between workers and bosses, and it stresses that under God's reign all the technical, strategic and management stuff is best offered in a context of honesty and kindness. Let it be heard in today's world.

And if the parable doesn't say any of that to you, but does speak to you – maybe for the first time and possibly in your evening years - of the unmerited but unconditional grace of God for you, then let's celebrate that as well. Whichever interpretation speaks to you, may it be religion making a difference that

offers life more abundant, through Jesus Christ.