



Sermon preached by Penny Flynn on 24th September 2023

Readings: Matthew 20,1-16; Exodus 16,2-15; Philippians 1,21-30

Trinity XVI: Harvest Service

Prayer: Lord, as we listen now for your word, we pray, as last Sunday, to see you more clearly, love you more dearly and follow you more nearly day by day. Amen.

There's a deal of grumbling in today's Bible readings! The Israelites grumbled to Moses about being led through a desert and not having any food. The vineyard workers of Jesus' parable grumbled about not having a fair wage.

Why pick such readings when this service is one of celebration for all God's good gifts?

Well, of course, turn the stories around, and when we see the other side we realise they do tell of God's good gifts. The Israelites were fed, daily, regularly, by God who wanted to test them to see if they would follow God's instructions. The vineyard workers really were treated fairly – the first to be employed just couldn't see it at the time, and the later-starters couldn't believe their luck!

In his retelling of this story of 'the differently waged persons', Martin Robert Walker writes a twist to the end – 'The disgruntled workers backed away from the owner, regrouped and held a meeting. They discussed the various possibilities for resolving their grievance with the owner, ranging from violent revolution to passive acceptance. Finally, they came to a consensus. "We have carefully considered your 'last will be first' philosophy and have found merit in it. We will show up for work at five o'clock tomorrow afternoon. See you then.' The owner was rendered speechless by their clever manipulation of his system of economic equality. Unfortunately, he had no recourse, as he had no intention of picking the grapes himself.'

Well, whatever we might think about the dubiousness of such a tongue-in-cheek re-telling, it is Tom Wright who reminds us that, 'One of the great inventions of modern Western society is the trade union. ... When, after a long struggle, workers with no power except their own labour managed to stand together and force the issue with the rich and strong, it was a great day for freedom and justice.' Hopefully, we can appreciate Jesus' intention is not to comment on the social justice of his day, but rather Jesus accepts the social and economic power of the landowner in order to say something about God. But what? In the story, the vineyard owner asks the last group of workers to be employed why they weren't working. They reply that nobody has hired them; which meant nobody had wanted them. But this person *did* want them, having spotted them there. This person gave them a chance and made them feel valued. So, it seems the landowner stands for God, and the workers for Israel.

Just before this passage, Jesus made the statement that 'many who are first shall be last, and the last shall be first,' as he was teaching the disciples a lesson in terms of closeness to himself and rewards for giving up their previous lives. So, is this vineyard and workers story related to that, possibly? 'Don't think that, because you've been close to me so far, you are now the favoured few for all time'. They are not to think that, because Jesus is going to bring in the kingdom of heaven, they are going to become rich and famous in their turn.

There are many, many starving or near-starving people in the world today, though, and grumbling to God or anyone else isn't going to feed them. But if part of the grumbling takes the form of prayer, and if part of praying is to be part of the answer to that prayer, then we realise that God will work through 'us' to bring relief. And there are many ways in which that can be done.

Depending on which website I read, there are clearly many hundreds of millions of people who go to bed hungry each night. According to the World Food programme, 'The scale of the current global hunger and malnutrition crisis is enormous. WFP estimates – from 79 of the countries where it works (and where data is available) – that **more than 345 million people face high levels of food**

insecurity in 2023. That is more than double the number in 2020. This constitutes a staggering rise of 200 million people compared to pre-COVID-19 pandemic levels. ... WFP is facing multiple challenges – the number of acutely hungry people continues to increase at a pace **that funding is unlikely to match**, while the **cost of delivering food assistance is at an all-time high** because food and fuel prices have increased. Unmet needs heighten the risk of hunger and malnutrition. Unless the necessary resources are made available, **lost lives and the reversal of hard-earned development gains** will be the price to pay.’

There’s not much in their statistics to celebrate, for sure. But the World Food Programme has some good news too and offers hope - through addressing the underlying causes of hunger, investing in resilience activities to help prevent the mass-migration seen in past years as people travel to find food in neighbouring lands. It can only work on a truly global level and with greater political engagement, as the world is committed to ending hunger and malnutrition by 2030 – there are many organisations writing about this aim.

Will the Lord say again, ‘I am going to rain bread from heaven for you, and each day the people shall go out and gather enough for that day?’ and ‘At twilight you shall eat meat, and in the morning you shall have your fill of bread; then you shall know that I am the Lord your God’??

Having food is indelibly and necessarily linked to the ability to purchase it – to having sufficient money to buy what you need. For most, that means working to earn your money, and in Jesus’ parable we saw one system of employment in his time. Today we might call it a zero-hours contract – except that there wasn’t even a contract; no-one signed up to anything – the workers each agreed to work for the ‘usual amount for a day’s work’, and it wasn’t until the end of the day when they were being paid that anyone knew what had been agreed for the workers taken on at the different times of day. It *was* the usual amount for a day’s work – not on an hourly basis, or per-part-of a day. Interesting is that the employer chose to see that the *last* ones taken on were the *first* to be paid – in full view of everyone. That must have been deliberate. He wouldn’t have had any trouble if he’d first paid those who’d been working all day. They’d have gone off with the agreed wage in their hand without a backward glance. The late arrivals would have realised their luck – and if they were sensible they’d have kept quiet and given thanks for the generosity of their employer. But that wasn’t the point of the parable.

Jane Williams writes in her lectionary reflection: ‘The people who had been working all day forget how glad they had been to see reinforcements, and how they had had to work less hard because of the extra help, and how the later workers had shared their food and drink, not having needed it themselves while standing around in the market place, waiting to be hired. They also forget that they were still taking home a good day’s wages to their families, and that the other workers had families too. Although they got exactly what they bargained for, it somehow felt diminished because others also had it’.

‘The all-day workers forget that they needed first what God was now offering to others. In their case, they argue, it was their entitlement. These others have not earned it, and should not have it ... The all-day workers can’t see the good day’s wages, the well-picked vineyard, and the joy of the other workers at being able to feed their families, because they are too wrapped up in their own sense of grievance.’

Harvest – have – starve – share.

And that sense of entitlement to which Jesus refers at other times and in other ways – even to the point of learning himself when challenged by a gentile woman that ‘even the dogs feed on the crumbs that fall from the master’s table.’

When I began thinking about this Harvest service, the thought came to me that there is another harvest in which God is keenly concerned. Whilst we celebrate harvest in terms of the provision of food – and our prayers and hymns have touched upon the harvests of earth’s minerals and our God-given talents too – we remember that God’s ultimate concern is the harvest of souls gathered into

heaven - and 'harvest' is a common biblical image for the end of time. I'm sorry if you'll miss the hymn 'Come, you thankful people, come' – there are many to choose from and we can't sing them all – but the 3rd and 4th verses particularly use this harvest language as the author, Henry Alford, wrote:

3. For the Lord our God shall come, and shall take the harvest home;
from the field shall in that day all offences purge away,
give his angels charge at last in the fire the tares to cast;
but the fruitful ears to store in his storehouse evermore.

The final verse is a prayer -

4. Even so, Lord, quickly come; bring thy final harvest home;
gather all your people in, free from sorrow, free from sin,
there, forever purified, in your presence to abide;
come, with all thine angels, come, raise the glorious harvest home. *CH4 233*

According to Matthew chapter 9, when Jesus saw the crowds, he had compassion on them and likened them to sheep without a shepherd, 'and he said to his disciples, 'The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest.' This, after travelling all over, preaching, teaching, healing Jesus needed reinforcements – and next, he gave his relatively-newly-appointed disciples authority to do the same, sending them out to specific places, to specific people, and with instructions as to what to do and how to do it – sowing the seeds of faith in God's kingdom, nurturing, encouraging, healing too. And throughout time since then, that task is ours to do. We have a role to play in God's ultimate harvest.

We may never have much experience of the farming that leads to food-production; we may never be actively involved in harvesting apart from the hedgerow blackberries and the produce of our own gardens or allotments – we celebrate the harvest of food because we need food to sustain our bodies and because of the mystery of what happens when a seed is planted, and nurtured through to ripening. But Christians are all labourers for God's harvest, sowing the seeds, and trusting in God's work in people's lives, also to do a bit of nurturing – watering, feeding, encouraging – so that when the time comes for the harvest, more people will be ready to enter God's barn. From a mailing from Bible Society this month comes news of the transformation of lives which is happening through the translation of the scriptures into the language of a remote people which is changing their lives forever. We can support their work with our prayers and donations. At the end of the Bible Society's letter is a quote from Colossians, chapter 1 verse 6 – '.... the gospel is bearing fruit and growing throughout the whole world – just as it has been doing among you'

To conclude – and quoting from Tom Wright once more: 'God's grace ...is not the sort of thing you can bargain with or try to store up. It isn't the sort of thing that one person can have a lot of and someone else only a little. The point of the story (in the gospel) is that what people get from having served God is not actually a 'wage' at all. It's not strictly a reward for work done. God doesn't make contracts with us, He makes covenants, in which (God) promises us everything and asks of us everything in return....'

May God grant us the grace to be thankful for the harvest which we have and from which we benefit; May God grant us the grace to do what we can to prevent starvation; may God grant us the grace to share what we have received and to be labourers in his Kingdom vineyard, and to offer our lives to our Lord willingly as we celebrate His provision today. Amen.

Penny Flynn

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