

## Sermon Trinity 15 September 20th 2020

Mathew 20: 16 'So the last will be first and the first will be last'.

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Parables have often suffered from over-interpretation by commentators rather than from being under interpreted. Often each verse is expounded with the same intensity as that used when interpreting Jesus detailed teaching such as that presented in the Sermon on the Mount.

But parables were spoken to the multitudes, not so that they could be pressured into yielding a multitude of different teachings where each character and object in parable finds a profound meaning, but rather that the hearers would understand the important principle that was being presented by Jesus. The parable of the prodigal son is, for instance, one such parable that has suffered over-interpretation over the years. The emphasis in today's church is usually placed on the treatment of the returning son, whereas at the time the main focus of the parable was to show how the scribes and Pharisees were a personification of the ungracious elder son. Like the elder son, the scribes and Pharisees had not grasped that men and women who were being brought back into a relationship with God through repentance and forgiveness were the people over whom there should have been rejoicing. The emphasis, then, in this parable should be always on the eldest son and not the younger.

The danger is similar when we come to the parable we are examining today, which concerns labourers in the vineyard. Jesus did not tell the parable to show what economic principles should be employed by owners of agricultural land and neither what sort of care should be laid upon employers when it came to the wages and conditions of work. The whole point of the parable and all Jesus is attempting to show, is that **salvation is not a reward system so that those who've worked longer and harder at it might receive more - but that it's a free gift given by God who shows mercy on all men and women. His mercy does not vary in an arbitrary manner from one person to the next. In short God does not have favourites and all are welcome in his kingdom.**

Over the past few weeks in our readings and sermons we have been focusing on what St. Matthew terms the 'Kingdom of Heaven', which is synonymous with the 'Kingdom of God' to which Mark and Luke refer. Since this is the central element of Christ's teaching, it is necessary to show how his teaching about salvation fits in. By late Old Testament times and in the period between the time of Ezra and Nehemiah and the birth of Christ (some 400 years) we know very little about Israel. What we know shows a growing dominance of Greek and Roman influences and ideas and a nationalistic yearning for divine intervention. For many this crystallised in the expectation of a new leader, a *Messiah* (Greek *Christos*, i.e. Christ), one who like the Israelite kings of old would be anointed by God. Jesus was born into this maelstrom of national and religious expectation and his message consists of the announcement of the *Kingdom of God* (or Heaven).

The kingdom was not to be an earthly kingdom, however, but an ethical one. Parable after parable addresses the simple question what is the kingdom of heaven really like. Several key strands emerge:-

- a. Jesus called Israel to repent of its nationalist - even racist - ambitions and follow a new vision. This even included love and prayer for enemies.
- b. Jesus recognised that Israel's problem was not external, but internal. Sin was at the root of the problem. Just as Jesus healed the sick, so Israel required healing from the sins of: inequality; valuing people because of wealth, power and status; and looking for sin everywhere but within the lives of the self-righteous. This explains the apparently harsh teaching he gave to the Pharisees, Sadducees and Scribes.
- c. The values of the kingdom apply in differing contexts. They apply to society and they apply to the individual ("unless a person is born again he or she cannot enter the kingdom of God" - John 3.3) **and it is here that our message this morning fits in, because the 'entry ticket' - what we call salvation - is a free gift of God – all we have to do is repent of our sins and we are welcome, whether we have been working in the vineyard all our lives or are merely newcomers.**

Over the centuries there has been much debate over whether the kingdom we are called to is individual, applies to society as a whole and whether it relates to the present (i.e. it is *realised* in Christ's teaching), or to the future (i.e. it is *eschatological*) and will be inherited by all believers at the end of time. To enter his peaceable kingdom is faith alone enough - as St. Paul, Martin Luther, virtually all conservative evangelicals and all fundamentalists assert - or are good works also required (e.g. Epistle of James).

Traditionally this has been an issue which has divided Christians and the traditional Protestant view that, faith, the individual and future expectation are all important, has been contrasted with both the Catholic and Eastern Orthodox view of the importance of good works and community, and the liberal/humanist perspective which holds that the key of the kingdom lies in ethical conduct.

These perspectives are not mutually exclusive as much recent ecumenical scholarship has shown. It is not a question of present or future, the individual or the corporate, faith or good works and what we do now and what we expect in the future. All these are important perspectives and this is what we are all called to strive for. Loving God and neighbour involves all aspects of the Kingdom of God.

In essence we are called by God to seek a better future for ourselves and the world by following the ethical teaching of Jesus, where others are put first and where all are viewed as brothers and sisters of Christ without any distinction of race, class, gender, nationality wealth and status. After all Jesus taught, 'what you did for the least of these brothers and sisters of mine you do for me'.

**But we also look forward to the future initiation of Christ's kingdom for the whole world, which he has already won for us. For a new and transformed earth and also eternal life for us all 'in the sure and certain hope of resurrection to eternal life.**

Christ's teaching about the kingdom therefore has both a present and a future aspect and, like St John writing the book we call Revelation, we look forward in joyous expectation to a future where there is 'a new heaven and a new earth, for the old heaven and old earth' will have passed away.

Amen

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