

20 September 2020

Exodus 16:2-15

Philippians 1:21-30

Matthew 20:1-16

“Moments of disruption and adversity often expose the stories that we tell about ourselves, our past, and our relationship with God. In Exodus 16, a narrative of distrust in God’s goodness feeds a distorted recollection of Israel’s past, and activates a nostalgic hunger for the fleshpots of Egypt.”¹ With food scarce, feeling vulnerable, and facing a journey of uncertain length, the Israelites have forgotten that in Egypt, while being perhaps well-fed, they had also been increasingly subjected to oppression under Pharaoh’s policies that were designed to ensure that they would not flourish and be fruitful. Slave masters were put over them, they were subjected to hard labour, and their male children were at risk of being cast into the Nile. It is going to take some time for them to unlearn habits cultivated under Pharaoh’s whip.

The stories we tell ourselves about how the world works are important. The world constantly tells us a set of stories based on scarcity and fears, stories based on distrust and looking after “number one”, stories that one’s worth is evaluated only in economic or status terms.

The stories we tell ourselves about how the world works are important. Even more important are the stories we tell ourselves about the character of God. Far too many people tell themselves (and others) stories about a god who is disinterested, or about a god who is capricious and is just as likely to smite them for some minor misdeed as to bless them; or about a god who is forever keeping a set of accounts by which the well-off and successful are receiving the just rewards for their good behaviour and the poor and failing are receiving the just desserts for their sins.

And then we come to the parable Jesus tells in Matthew 20. It is commonly referred to as the parable of the workers in the vineyard, but it might be better referred to as the parable of the compassionate employer.²

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² The following owes much to Bailey, pp. 355-364, often quoting directly.

The owner of a vineyard needs extra workers. In that part of the world, the demand for seasonal labour for pruning or harvest time is met by heading for a place in the village market where those without regular employment gather each day in the hope of getting a job, any job, even for a day. So here we find the owner of the vineyard in the corner of the market, selecting some workers and offering them the standard wage of one denarius for one day's work. The workers accept his proposal, perhaps hoping that all going well they might be hired for a second day or perhaps longer.

Halfway through the morning, the owner returns to the market. He finds other unemployed men standing there: they appear eager for work. He makes a second selection, but this time does not quote a pay scale – simply saying that he will pay them what is just. These men trust him and accept his terms. We may expect that they do so rejoicing that they have been spared further public shame and that they will have something for themselves and their families at the end of the day.

And the scene is repeated as the day progresses.

Is this a particularly disorganised vineyard owner, who has no clue about the workforce required for the day's work in his vineyard?

No, rather it appears that this is a particularly compassionate owner. He has seen the many eager, unemployed men, at the beginning of the day and selected some of them hoping, for their sakes, that the others would soon be engaged by someone else. When he returns, it is not to meet his need for more labour, but really to see what has happened to these others.

And so the story goes on, with the vineyard owner returning again and again to the marketplace to check on the situation; each time selecting more men who want work, and offering to pay them what is just.

Finally, near the end of the day he returns again, and finds some still so eager for work that they haven't given up to slink off home. Rather than simply giving them charity and further humiliation, the vineyard owner invites them to come and work. At this time there is no explicit offer of payment; but it is work which will save some

embarrassment, and – given what they’ve seen of the owner’s behaviour with the others over and over through the day – they trust that they will not be put at risk. Perhaps they hope that a trial period will lead to work the next day.

By the end of the day five different groups of workers are busy in the vineyard. Only one has a contract, a promise of a specific amount for the day’s work. Three other groups employed at different times through the day were promised an unspecified amount that would be “just”. The last group was promised nothing.

Jesus told parables using scenes that his hearers would find familiar, and often then throws in a surprise to jolt the people out of their comfort zone and to make his point. It is at this stage in the Matthew 20 parable that Jesus does exactly that. There are in fact three things that his hearers would have found surprising.

The first is the appearance of a new character, the estate manager or foreman. If the owner has such a person on his staff, it begs the question as to why it was the owner going again and again to the market to hire workers. A traditional landowner may give his manager careful instructions at the beginning of the day, and ask for a report at the end. It is unheard of that such an owner would make the trek from the vineyard to the market and back five times in a single day.

The second surprise is that the owner tells his manager to call the workers and to pay each of them “the wage”, that is, one denarius each: a full day’s pay for each man, regardless of when he was hired. This is just not normal behaviour. This is not how the world works!

The third surprise is the order in which the owner ordered that they be paid. You’d expect that the owner would ensure that those hired first were paid first – it seems just the normal thing to do, and given the strangeness of the pay-scale the owner intends to use paying the first-hired first would also have the benefit of ensuring that these men were heading off home so they would not witness those coming after being paid the same amount. Instead, the owner directs that those who had no

contract and not even an expectation of being paid justly would be paid first, witnessed by those who had greater claim. Is the owner looking for trouble?

Well, the owner certainly gets trouble. We can only imagine the rising tension in the first group as they see what is happening with the other four groups. We might expect that they start to feel that they are likely in for a bonus: after all, they worked longer than each of the groups that in turn receives a denarius each. They are to be disappointed.

The owner extends amazing grace to the four groups hired later in the day; and simply pays those hired first exactly what they were promised. But the grace demonstrated by the owner is resented by those first hired, who developed the view that they should be entitled to more than their contract specified.

“It’s not fair”, shouts the leader, “We should receive more”. But remember, no-one is underpaid in this parable. The complaint comes from the *justly* paid who cannot tolerate grace. “You have made them equal to us!”

To their market-oriented minds, their worth as human beings is directly related to how much they are paid.

It is a very effective story. And we need to remember that it is a story, a parable, which Jesus told to make a point and to have an effect. In his parables Jesus takes what is commonplace and employs it, often with a twist, to make a single point. In this story, Jesus uses the images of vineyard and owner which were commonplace images of Israel and God. It is significant that it is the owner who goes to the marketplace. That it is the owner of the vineyard and not his manager that goes repeatedly to the marketplace speaks to the Incarnation: that God in the person of Jesus has entered into the hurly-burly and difficulty of life to have compassion and to save at great cost to himself. The master, symbolising God, does not stand aloof. His compassion leads to costly action among the poor.

It is a very effective story. But like many of Jesus' stories it does not really end – it just stops. Jesus does not tell us how the workers respond to the owner's explanation. Those listening to Jesus then, and we now, are now placed on the stage and invited to finish the drama in the nitty-gritty of our own lives and our own understandings.

In the time of Jesus there were many who could not abide his insistence that the grace, goodness, and forgiveness of God is extended to those who appeared undeserving – sinners, tax collectors, outcasts, prostitutes, those not of Israel's race. To their minds they were under contract, a covenant, with God; and to their minds that covenant excluded others. In God's purposes however, the people of the covenant were only part of the picture. Like the vineyard owner, God has compassion for *all* who would willingly take up his offer and receive it.

In our own time we are invited to consider the position we take in response to this radically liberal God who extends grace to the undeserving. Where do we place ourselves in this narrative? Are we the secure ones, believing ourselves to be under contract with God with certain well-understood rewards if we show up and do the right thing? Or are we those who respond later to his gracious call, undeserving perhaps? Are we those who are amazed to find ourselves the recipients of God's favour which brings salvation?

And what does this mean for how we behave towards others?

Rather than telling ourselves the Pharaoh narratives of distrust and oppression, or the desert narratives of scarcity, vulnerability, and uncertainty, of kingdom of this world narratives of strict cause and effect, of keeping score and making someone pay, of on the one hand hopelessness or on the other hand arrogance and hubris that human progress will fix it all ... rather than telling ourselves these kinds of narratives, how do we live instead into the radically liberal ways of the kingdom of God?

Sources:

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