

This sermon consists two parts. The first part is to do with the meaning of the Parable of the Vineyard in today's Gospel reading. The second is to do with the Christian understanding of work which the Parable of the Vineyard provides some clues.

Whether we like it or not, directly or indirectly we come into contact with trade unions. In many Western countries now, the role of the unions has become quite different from what their founders envisaged. In some cases, these have been for the better, in others, for the worse.

Some unions have changed from their original purpose in that they have often set workers against one another. They have insisted on different pay for different jobs, even if the employers had other ideas. Such unions would have been horrified at the story Jesus told about this employer and the workers who laboured, some for the whole day, others for part, and others again for only the last hour. Indeed, we are not surprised when, in the story, the workers themselves grumbled. Where is the sense of fairness, of justice, in paying the last workers the same as the first?

Jesus doesn't intend the story to serve as a comment on the social justice of his day. How likely such an incident is to have happened, we can only guess, but most people who have studied that world think it is very unlikely. Jesus is accepting, for the purpose of the story, the social and economic power of the landowner, in order to say something about God; what he would say to rich landowners themselves, may be guessed from chapter 19.

But what is he saying about God, and why is he saying it here? To answer this we need to look a bit more closely at the last group of workers, the ones who were hired when only one hour of the day was left. It is curious, we may suppose, that they hadn't been spotted before. Had they not been in the marketplace earlier? The vineyard owner questions them: why haven't you been working? Their answer is very revealing: nobody has hired us, nobody has given us a job. Nobody, in other words, wanted them. They were, perhaps, the sort of people everybody tried not to hire.

But the landowner hired them, and paid them the same as the people who had been working and sweating all day in the heat of the sun. As in so many of Jesus' stories, the landowner is obviously standing for God, and the workers for Israel. Who are the different categories of workers meant to represent?

We must always remember the parables of Jesus are not simply *information about* the kingdom, but are part of the *means* of bringing it to birth. This story is about a vineyard. Israel is the vineyard, her rulers the vineyard-keepers. Jesus is claiming to be developing a story already used by Isaiah (5.1-7). Whenever the hours or dates and numbers mentioned in Jesus' parables, let us not forget Daniel's story: these are apocalyptic references. In other words, the story is referring to the great time of renewal of the covenant, i.e., God became King again and restored the fortune of Israel. It is also a story of judgment of those who had not followed Jesus and vindication for those who had. That is, those who had their own idea of the Kingdom of God which were totally different from Jesus'. All of them were engaged in the establishment of the Kingdom of God. Here, as in the Parable of the Sower, Jesus may have implied the Macabbees, the Pharisees, the Qumran community, the Zealots, perhaps even the movement of John the Baptist. They all had engaged in the movement of the Kingdom of God but, in the end, which one would be declared the true movement? From a historical point of view, Jesus' movement and his followers were indeed the last to engage in the movement of the Kingdom of God. Furthermore, who is right and who is wrong is not dependent on them but on God's own decision. How to know God's choice, i.e., the eleventh hour workers? In Jesus' understanding, his followers will eventually be vindicated at the end, when the great tribulation comes to Israel.

But Jesus probably intends the Parable as a warning to the disciples themselves about their own attitudes. When he said, at the end of the previous chapter, that those at the front would end up at the back, and vice versa, it may have seemed that 'those at the front' was referring to the rich and powerful, and that 'those at the back' meant the disciples themselves. However, that saying was part of the answer to Peter, after his somewhat self-centred question in 19.27 ('We have left everything and followed you; so what is our reward?'). Jesus is intending that the riddle about first and the last, the front and the back, to be a warning to the disciples themselves: don't think that, because you've been close to me so far, you are now the favoured few for all time.

In fact, the whole chapter 20 is a warning to the disciples about the danger they are in, supposing that, because Jesus is bringing in the kingdom of heaven, they are going to become rich and famous in their turn. That's not the sort of thing, Jesus warns them, that God's Kingdom is about. They may have set out with Jesus from the very beginning; but others may well come in much later and end up getting paid just the same, the regular daily wage.

God's grace, in short, 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 is that what people get from having served God and his Kingdom is not, actually, a 'wage' at all. It's not, strictly, a reward for work done. God doesn't make contracts with us, as if we could bargain or negotiate for a better deal. He makes covenants, in which he promises us everything and asks us for everything in return. When he keeps his promises, he is not rewarding us for effort, but doing what comes naturally to his overflowing generous nature.

The warning is not just meant for the disciples. It is also meant for the church of every generation. It is always dangerous to be 'the first'.

Now let me come to the concept of 'work'.

Work is a form of personal vocation, a calling to realise oneself. Nowadays, 'work' has been replaced by the word 'profession'.

The concept of work as the West now knows it – something every adult, whether formally employed or not, does in one form or another until he or she gets too old to go on doing it – is a later fruit of Christian reflection. In earlier periods of history, including Christian history, work was seen as something only certain social classes did. The Landowners, did they work? It was not, of course, that they actually did nothing, nor that what they did was unimportant, but simply that it was not conceived as 'work' in the sense that a carpenter or a household servant had work. The landowner in Jesus' Parable works as hard as the labourers, going out to the street to search and employ labourers. Yet the idea that everyone has work to do was never wholly absent from Christianity. The Parables of the Vineyard and of the Talents connect work with the realization of one's self. Every labourer in the Parable of the Vineyard receives the same pay is to our late modern mind unthinkable. But perhaps we should consider it is not the pay that matters most, but that the work itself provides the means of self-realization. This is the most important thing for every employer to consider if employment occurs.

I came across a great commentary on the Collect of the 17th Sunday after Trinity and I want to share with you as conclusion:

In the Collect for Trinity XVII we are invited to pray that God's grace may 'prevent and follow us', in order that we may 'continually be given to all good works.' The 'we' means not just 'each of us separately,' but society as a whole, the only context in which work can be undertaken and effected. That our society may be continually 'given to' its work – not merely given it – it is necessary that the works be 'good,' well conceived, well fitted to their circumstance, broadly and wisely designed, successfully carried through, and that we be fit to attend to 'all' good works, not only those fashionable ones which carry éclat. And that can be so only if they call not only on the strength of labor they require to execute but also on the wisdom they need to plan them well, for which we must ask the 'grace' of God. God's activity not only 'accompanies,' but 'precedes' and 'follows.' It is required not merely in the execution, but in the imagination of good works and their successful execution. Not only the rewards of work, but the opportunities for it are the gift of a generous master; is that not the heart of the principle of the equality of workers, as asserted in the parable of the vineyard? If we are wise, then we pray for work, and especially, since 'good works' are a cultural gift of vast importance, easily lost by forgetfulness and negligence, that we may be 'continually' given to them.