



September^{24th}

THE NEW SHOFAR

*My thoughts are not your thoughts and my ways are not your ways
(Isaiah 55:9)*

Thank God that God judges as God and not like I would

The thing about justice in the world today is that it's meaning is as variable as the number of people acting as judge. We are influenced by circumstances, our own histories, experiences and prejudices and a whole lot more. Added to that are the community expectations – what those around us expect justice to look like. Then, into all of that comes Jesus, turning over the metaphorical tables with a justice of his own. He had his own concept of what was fair, just and right.

The Kingdom of Heaven is like...

It must have both offended and stunned the Jewish authorities of the time to hear this parable by Jesus. Their own ethical calculations had been tipped on their heads. The hard-working labourers in the vineyard feel duped and the Johnny-come-lately given rewards he should never have received. Those who began work at 6am should have received more than those hired at 9am, noon and 3pm. The first group were guaranteed a denarius a day and the rest offered *what is just/right*. Everyone was happy with that arrangement, content that is until the master gave the same wages to a man who had come late to the harvesting.

It is worth remembering that the vineyard in question would have been some distance outside of the town and those given employment would have either walked or been taken in a slow-moving wagon to the fields. Given the last man was invited to take up work at 5pm, by the time they reached the workplace, it would have been close to knocking off time (6pm). In other words, he did almost nothing. The first man would have been working in the hot sun, with the dry Sirocco wind blowing over him for twelve hours. He would have earned every penny of his denarius. These are the two who are being contrasted here.

First the Jews and then the Gentiles

Let us go to St Paul for some guidance here. This is what he wrote in **Romans 1:16**...*The gospel is the power of God unto salvation to everyone who believes*. What an exhilarating message this is to all those who feel that there is something about us, something in our past that rules us out of the love of God! Wrong family, wrong background, wrong education, wrong language, wrong race, wrong culture, wrong sexual preference, wrong moral track record. Then to hear the word, *everyone who believes*. **Everyone!**

The Jewish people understood the special relationship they had with God, a relationship put in place by God when He freely chose to make covenant with them. They did not earn this...*The Lord did not set his love on you nor choose you because you were more in number than any of the peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples, but because the Lord loved you and kept the oath which he swore to your forefathers*” (**Deuteronomy 7:7-8**).

But there is a danger here, a danger that lures the people into thinking they alone were to be saved, and saved on the basis of being the sons and daughters of Abraham. Jesus had warned them...*And do not think you can say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham*(**Matthew 3:9**). Jesus the

Messiah was the One inaugurating the New Covenant, a covenant sealed in His own blood, a covenant that changed the ground rules for salvation. In Christ, *those who have faith are children of Abraham (Galatians 3:7)*.

The ground rules have been changed and the Jewish leaders did not like it

Remember how Jesus had praised Zaccheus' repentant heart, opening up the Good News for all men and women promising that *...the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost (Luke 19:10)*. This was the great message of salvation permeating the entire New Testament. But not everyone was content to accept this. The so called "righteous" in Israel were stunned to hear how *God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world but that the world through him might be saved...(John 3:17)*. As the Good Shepherd, Jesus leaves behind the ninety-nine sheep in pursuit of the single lost sheep.

All through Jesus' ministry, He reached out to those who needed Him. He conversed with a despised Samaritan woman at a well—surprising even His disciples (**John 4:27**). He forgives an immoral woman in **Luke 7**, He helps a Syro-Phoenician woman in **Mark 7**, He touches a leper in **Luke 5**, and He enters Zacchaeus's house and dines with him in **Luke 19**. Again and again, the loving and merciful Jesus touched the untouchable and loved the unlovely.

Jesus came to save sinners. Tradition, cultural limitations and bans, and the frowns of a few do not matter when a soul's eternal destiny is on the line because Jesus saw individuals, not just their labels. He saw men and women made in the image and likeness of his Father in heaven, living souls He had been sent to save. He had compassion and sought to meet the needs around Him. In sharing the word of God, Jesus ate with sinners and spent time with them. Seeing all of this, sinners were no doubt inspired to know Him better. They recognized Jesus as a righteous man, a man of God—the miracles He performed bore witness to that—and they saw His compassion and sincerity.

The last labourer received as much as the first called

In **Matthew 19** we have the story of Jesus' meeting with a rich man who came to him asking about what is needed for him to inherit eternal life. The answer Jesus gave him was at first clear and unremarkable - *keep the commandments*. It was the next bit that created difficulties...*go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me*. This gift of eternal life was now open to anyone, everyone willing to put aside their old ways of living, set themselves apart from the grind of achieving treasures on earth for the sake of obtaining *treasures in heaven*. If they followed Jesus, Life would be theirs. Salvation was a freely given gift from above and God's generosity opened this gift up to all who believed, to all whose lives were focussed on imitating Christ Jesus.

This is highlighted in the parable. Who spends the whole day waiting to be hired but does not find success until the end of the day? In Jesus' time, these would be the weak, infirm, and disabled. Maybe the elderly, too and, of course, the bone idle. And other targets of discrimination, such as criminals or anyone with a bad reputation. A God who is "just," then, is inclined to show special generosity to the poor and outcast, to those who struggle and are in need of His loving mercy. No wonder the respectable people get anxious.

The landowner gave each worker *what was right*. He wanted no one to miss out on that "denarius" (salvation) and offered it to the workers no matter how much they had contributed to the harvest. What he wanted was men who would say yes to his invitation, who took that first difficult step forward into living their lives under the divine gaze.