

15h Sunday after Trinity Sunday 20 September 2020

As you will have seen we plan to return to holding services in the Benefice from Sunday 4th October. Since numbers will be strictly limited and since many will not feel able to return to in person services we plan to continue circulating a short reflection each week as we have been doing through the whole of lockdown. Since this reflection will now be a shortened version of the sermon to be delivered in the Sunday service it will however be circulated after the service rather than before.

We pray for our churches in this Benefice as they make the necessary preparations to resume worship. We give thanks for those who have cared for our churches over the past months, and for those who continue to do so; for those who are meeting to find a way forward for our benefice following the departure of our incumbent, and for all those who have continued to support each other and their communities during this time

We pray for the world around us, affected so badly by disease and by lack of food and clean water and twisted in so many places by violence and injustice, and for all those anxious and afraid for their futures.

We pray for all world leaders, that they may govern wisely and well for all their people.

We pray for all who are sick in body, mind or spirit and for all who care for them; for those who are anxious about someone they love; for those facing their last days, and for those who watch over them.

Amen

Collect

God who in generous mercy sent the Holy Spirit upon your church in the burning fire of your love:
Grant that your people may be fervent in the fellowship of the gospel that, always abiding in you,
They may be found steadfast in faith and active in service
Through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord
Who is alive and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit
One God, now and forever
Amen

Readings

Exodus 16: 2-20

The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. The Israelites said to them, 'If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.'

Then the Lord said to Moses, 'I am going to rain bread from heaven for you, and each day the people shall go out and gather enough for that day. In that way I will test them, whether they will follow my instruction or not. On the sixth day, when they prepare what they bring in, it will be twice as much as they gather on other days.' So Moses and Aaron said to all the Israelites, 'In the evening you shall know that it was the Lord who brought you out of the land of Egypt, and in the morning you shall see the glory of the Lord, because he has heard your complaining against the Lord. For what are we, that you complain against us?' And Moses said, 'When the Lord gives you meat to eat in the evening and your fill of bread in the morning, because the Lord has heard the complaining that you utter against him—what are we? Your complaining is not against us but against the Lord.'

Then Moses said to Aaron, ‘Say to the whole congregation of the Israelites, “Draw near to the Lord, for he has heard your complaining.” ’ And as Aaron spoke to the whole congregation of the Israelites, they looked towards the wilderness, and the glory of the Lord appeared in the cloud. The Lord spoke to Moses and said, ‘I have heard the complaining of the Israelites; say to them, “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.” ’

In the evening quails came up and covered the camp; and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. When the layer of dew lifted, there on the surface of the wilderness was a fine flaky substance, as fine as frost on the ground. When the Israelites saw it, they said to one another, ‘What is it?’ For they did not know what it was. Moses said to them, ‘It is the bread that the Lord has given you to eat.

Philippians 1: 21 - end

For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain. If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labour for me; and I do not know which I prefer. I am hard pressed between the two: my desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better; but to remain in the flesh is more necessary for you. Since I am convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with all of you for your progress and joy in faith, so that I may share abundantly in your boasting in Christ Jesus when I come to you again. Only, live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that, whether I come and see you or am absent and hear about you, I will know that you are standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel, and are in no way intimidated by your opponents. For them this is evidence of their destruction, but of your salvation. And this is God’s doing. For he has graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well—since you are having the same struggle that you saw I had and now hear that I still have.

Matthew 20: 1- 16

‘For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire labourers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the labourers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. When he went out about nine o’clock, he saw others standing idle in the market-place; and he said to them, “You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.” So they went. When he went out again about noon and about three o’clock, he did the same. And about five o’clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, “Why are you standing here idle all day?” They said to him, “Because no one has hired us.” He said to them, “You also go into the vineyard.” When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, “Call the labourers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.” When those hired about five o’clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, saying, “These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.” But he replied to one of them, “Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?” So the last will be first, and the first will be last.’

Reflection

We are all understandably concerned about the COVID situation and the effect it is having on our wellbeing and on our economy. We are all concerned about those who have lost their jobs or are unable to find work and we all fear that this is only going to get worse as we approach the end of the Furlough scheme. This week’s gospel reading also tells of a workforce waiting to find work - the parable of the labourers in the vineyard. Perhaps it will encourage us to think about our own attitude to work, and to how we value the efforts of others.

As we all know the men who worked for just one hour received the same pay as those who worked in the vineyard for a full day! Many of us might say, "It's grossly unfair!" Perhaps we become so focussed on what is 'fair' in our view that we forget about generosity.

I wonder how many of us think we are in the group in this life of those who are 'first' and those who are 'last'? Perhaps you are feeling grateful for all that you have in these COVID times – giving thanks for your continued financial means, for the roominess of your house, for your garden and for local friends that you can still meet albeit at a distance and in fewer numbers than previously. Or perhaps you are feeling let down, isolated and unhappy. Perhaps you are worried about your job, or your welfare or your state of mind. This parable reminds us to always think of those who in this life are 'last'.

At five o'clock the landowner went out into the marketplace and he found others standing around idle. "Why?" he asked. "Because no one has hired us," they replied. They were surplus to requirements. These were the very people Jesus calls us to serve as he did. The ones left behind by society. The ones nobody else wanted. The last will be first. You can make your own list of those that are last, or unwanted in society today

- Those unable to work for whatever reason
- Those who are less fortunate, the homeless
- Those who have passed their use-by date, the elderly, the misfits,
- Those of a different colour or creed from ourselves

These are often "the last" in the world's concerns. This is a call to all of us to bring the last to the front; and to help, in our own way, to make those the world considers the last into our first.

The real message in today's parable is not just that those who worked the shortest time got the same as the others, it is that these were the people who no-one else wanted - the bottom of the social pile, but they too received the living wage and the dignity that comes with not being left behind. It is such a human thing to want reward for our efforts and to want more reward than the person next to us if we have worked harder. It is such a difficult thing to do – to get away from this perception of how to value people and to give up some of what we want to preserve the dignity of another that has not worked the way we have.

What account will I, or you, give when the Lord comes in judgement. Our standard of measurement, our values, should be the generosity of God, not the meanness of market forces. Let's think - who are the 'last' around us. What can we do in our lives to help someone, just one person, who is last move a little closer to being first?