**Sermon 20th September 2020.**

Matthew 20 v.1-16 – The Master seeks his workers.

Imagine arriving at the Job Centre, in need of work. Imagine the men who were standing in that Palestinian market place. They were not street corner idlers, lazing away their time. The market place was the equivalent of the job centre or employment agency. A man came first thing in the morning, carrying his tools, and awaited until someone hired him. They stood waiting for work and the fact that some of them stood there until 5pm is proof of how desperately they wanted it.

When I joined British Rail in 1978, it was widely seen as a “Job for life”. Needless to say, it did not turn out that way and at one point I found myself queuing at the Monkgate Job Centre, disorientated by the events that had placed me there and out of my comfort zone in a most unfamiliar situation, yet one bound by strict protocols and procedures. Fortunately, I soon got further employment.

Towards the end of my career I had one of those much maligned Zero hours contracts although, I have to say that in my case, it was entirely appropriate, as it allowed me to finish some long standing projects while at the same time easing myself into retirement. But employment, or the lack of it, does so much to define us.

And so to 2020, when the pandemic has disrupted many peoples’ jobs. As a Trustee of a Railway Museum in Wales, I have recently observed the recruitment of a short term attendant, to allow the museum to re-open with all of the Covid19 precautions in place. It was eye opening how many applied for the post at this time. People with more qualifications than were needed; people who lived miles away; some who, frankly, had no idea how to put together a CV; people who were - I guess - desperate for some employment, even for a job advertised as only lasting for 4 months. A sad sign of these, our unprecedented times.

Jesus uses parables to proclaim what has been hidden; he offers pictures of real life situations which carry an implied but fairly obvious warning or encouragement. The human encounter in the stories Jesus told reveal what God’s rule looks like “on the ground” – on earth as it is in heaven.

In his Gospel, Matthew encourages us to hear Jesus’ parables as disclosing the reality of God’s rule. The images and narrative are a means of penetrating hearts and minds that have become dulled to God’s word. Yet these parables reveal the truth that God rules over this world which in many parts still resists or ignores him. I speak words which aim to vividly paint both the blessing of accepting God’s rules and the danger of rejecting them.

Today, our Gospel reading is the parable of the labourers in the vineyard. Here we have a situation that frequently happened at certain times in Palestine. Grapes ripen towards the end of September and then close on its heels the rains come. If the harvest was not gathered in before the rains broke then the crop would be ruined. Harvest was a frantic race against time. Any worker was welcome, even if he could only give an hour. One denarius was the normal day’s wage for a labourer – a living wage – yet one that left little margin.

We may be tempted to make a correlation between the figure of power – the landowner – and God, because in the story he acts with such generosity. But perhaps we should resist that temptation, for what we have here is a picture of God’s kingdom-way, embodied in the everyday world of work and wage earning. In fact, we can see the landowner as an opposite to the rich young man [Matthew 19 v.16-22]. The landowner takes the step of generosity which the rich young man was reluctant to take.

This generosity is not a matter of mere random “charity”; or of giving money to salve a bad conscience. It is a matter of justice. The day-labourers were near the bottom of the pile, victims of a harsh social system. The denarius was a survival wage. Those who work longer and harder are to embrace the landowner’s spirit of generosity which allowed those hired later in the day to put bread on the table.

In strict justice, the fewer hours a man worked, the less pay he should have received. But the master knew perfectly well that one denarius a day was no great wage; he knew that if a worker went home with less, there would be a worried wife and hungry children; therefore he went beyond justice and in generous compassion and tenderness, gave them more than was their due.

Jesus preached real life parables. They help us see the joy and reality of God’s rule and the choices that it demands of us. We are not to imagine an abstract, purely heavenly kingdom, but one whose signs are seen in the everyday world of employment and unemployment, factory and farm; city and village – right under the nose of this world’s rulers and their systems, which often operate so differently. May we choose to go beyond justice and live in generous compassion and tenderness. In doing so, we live out the prayer ... “Thy kingdom come; thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.”

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