

Based on Matthew 20: 1-16

Well our reading from Matthew has something in common with other examples in scripture, involving human beings moaning about how God treats them – as compared with how they *think* they should be treated.

For instance, another example of people bemoaning how ‘hard done by’ they think they are is Exodus 16: 2-15, where we have the story of the miraculous feeding of the people in the wilderness. A story that starts with us being told about the moans and groans of the people – something which crops up quite a lot during the accounts of the wilderness wanderings. 16: 3 *“If Yahweh intended to kill us, why not in Egypt where at least our bellies were full?”* And because of the moans, God acts – as if to demonstrate that their moaning is just an example of their stupidity.

It also brings to mind the protests of the disciples in Mark 6:35-37, just before the feeding of the 5,000. Plenty of food appears as a sort of benevolent rebuke to the foolishness of the people who are panicking that there won’t be enough to go round.

In the scriptural examples of unappreciative and complaining human beings, the people are in need of God’s grace. But so often, the recipients of that grace don’t immediately see the full significance of what is being done for them. God intervenes in human life to help us to see beyond our immediate discontent with our situations. God tries to guide us into understanding that what we need is something much more profound than some material acquisition that will only satisfy the superficial and materialistic concerns about which human beings can become so animated and obsessive.

God’s miraculous gifts should never be taken for granted. They are to be used in the manner and for the purpose intended by God. It can often be difficult to understand the ingratitude of people who have witnessed powerful expressions of God’s mercy and yet seem to prefer grumbling to praise. It reminds me of the disciples again, who often displayed an exasperating inability to understand and to be responsive to what Jesus was about. The obtuse attitudes of the disciples and indeed of Moses’ followers demonstrate the seemingly limitless inclusiveness and patience of God’s mercy towards us.

The word ‘grace’ is cherished in the Christian vocabulary. Simply put, it describes the mercy of God demonstrated in countless ways to undeserving people. It is relevant to mention, bearing in mind this week’s news, that the very popular hymns ‘Amazing Grace’ was written by John Newton, a former slave trader (or press ganged sailor on a slave ship depending upon whose account you read), who became an Anglican priest in England in 1773. The hymn was originally called “Faith’s Review and Expectation” but the words haven’t changed much and always started with the lines *“Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me”*. It drew on Newton’s experience in 1748 when the slave ship he was on was hit by a violent storm and the outcome of the incident caused his conversion to Christianity. He claimed that God’s grace had preserved him and he went on to support abolitionists Cowper and Wilberforce in the years that followed. In 1807, when the first act to abolish the slave trade finally became law, it is said that John Newton *“nearly blind and near death rejoiced to hear the wonderful news”*. Sadly he died before William Wilberforce succeeded with the Act that gave freedom to all slaves in the British Empire in 1833. John Newton it seems experienced God’s amazing grace first hand, albeit

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that his bitter regret for his former life must have made accepting that grace a painful process with a sense of profound unworthiness.

So I think that the perceived action and effect can mean that ‘grace’ may often lose its ‘cutting edge’. I think that it can somehow get detached from the nature of what we may think of as a righteous God and when that happens, nothing jolts and jars our sentimentality quite like the parable of the labourers in the vineyard!

It’s a vivid and abrasive story, a perspective of the nature of ‘grace’ is shown that inevitably leaves anyone reading it with a few questions afterwards.

Was the owner really fair?

Do the workers who worked all day have a legitimate reason to complain?

This story itself actually needs very little explanation. Its impact is so forceful and direct and so engaging that the trick really is to let the story have its own way and then perhaps help each other to understand our individual responses to it.

The audience of this story is primarily the disciples. The passage is part of their ‘instruction’ as they make their move from Galilee to Jerusalem.

The parable is not, in the first instance, addressed to the crowds or to enquirers, but to ‘insiders’, who know a little bit at least about divine grace. But there is also something of a ‘prod’ in the ribs for those who have this privileged position of ‘insiders’ with Jesus – because in effect, the story shows what it means for the first to be last and the last to be first!

In this story, we can see grace shown through two sets of relationships.

The first is the relationship between the workers who work ALL DAY and the vineyard owner. The precise telling of the story leaves us with a final scene in which the labourers who have worked ALL DAY stand by and watch as the manager pays the other workers a full day’s wages. The first group’s anticipation of a bigger wage mounts as they see the generosity shown to the others. When they receive only the *agreed* amount, they are understandably not very happy.

We probably need to think a bit more about the apparent unfairness of the owner. Imagine what would happen if the world really functioned that way!

What if the ‘equal pay for equal work’ principle never applied?

But then divine grace doesn’t work on the ‘merit’ system. And because it doesn’t, we ‘insiders’ are inclined to grumble. We wonder if grace doesn’t undermine the whole point of being good, for observing standards, for keeping rules and for living justly. We second-guess a God who breaches the system and equalises pay like this.

We could support the owner’s generosity if the groups of workers that came after noon had merely been delayed for some genuine practical reason. But the owner’s actions are

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not the sign of a little generosity to an unfortunate few. They call for a totally different way of viewing God.

The second set of relationships in the story gets us even deeper into what might be called the ‘offensive’ character of grace. It’s the relationship between the two groups of workers.

The ‘all day’ group say: “*These last worked only one hour and you have made them equal to us.*” They are envious of the generosity shown to the others.

Presumably, had they received the better deal they would have been overjoyed by the owner’s generous method of book-keeping? What they can’t take in is the generosity that puts the latecomers on a par with them!

So they aren’t really against grace – they are just against it when it’s given to others and all that it implies!

It’s an old story. Jonah sat on a hill outside Nineveh and sulked when God saved the city. The elder brother thought his father was a doting old fool when his father invited him to join in celebrating the prodigal’s return. The Pharisee at prayer thanks God that he is not a sinful publican.

Divine grace is a great equaliser which rips away any presumed privilege and puts all recipients on an equal footing. That can be hard to stomach when we have burdened ourselves with a merit system and want to see reward for our labours. It’s hard to stomach when we discover those guilty of wrongs we have long opposed (e.g. racism, sexism etc) are brothers and sisters to whom the same divine generosity has been shown. Grace no longer seems so sentimental.

So I think that we need to recognise a number of things:

God gives what is needed to those who need it

God knows better than we do about how much is to be given and to whom.

We should rejoice in the grace and generosity of God, irrespective of *how much* is given and to whom.

We should trust God to be there for us when *our time* comes to be in need of grace.

We can never *earn* god’s grace by any merit system – we could never earn enough ‘loyalty points’ to deserve it!

Let’s thank God for grace in all its forms and may we be more appreciative of what we are given rather than complaining about those things that we aren’t given.

Amen