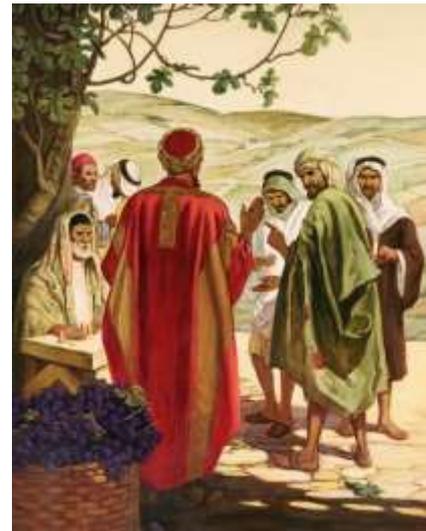


## Reflection: Sunday 20 September 2020

Matthew 20: 1-16

One of the links between people of every age, culture and society is that we love a good story, and Jesus was a master story-teller. He had a wonderful way of connecting with his audience by rooting his narrative in the everyday life and experience of those around him. His listeners were immediately engaged and wanting to know more. The parable we're reflecting on today is the routine gathering of the grape harvest.

We are reminded of the traditional way of recruiting casual labour; men looking for work would gather to wait for an employer to come by. The youngest, fittest and strongest would hope to be among those picked first, for a day's work. But, if the work proved to be slow or the harvest greater than expected, the over-seer would return for more labourers. In the case of this parable, the owner of the vineyard had to return several times throughout the day. There is a sense of urgency to complete the work and to ensure that the harvest, a good harvest, is completed on time.



As the story unfolded, the crowd was fully in tune with Jesus' account, until the time of reckoning arrived. The workers were waiting to be paid, but contrary to all expectations, the owner of the vineyard paid them all at the same rate. There was no consideration of the length of the day or the hours they had worked. This is not what anyone expected to hear. They were not at all impressed, neither the characters in the story nor the folk in the crowd.

So, Jesus had to explain his rather strange words, that the last would be first and the first would be last. In other words, the rules of God's kingdom are not the ways of this world. Jesus will turn the world we know, its measures and standards, upside down, inside out and back to front. The last will be first and the first will be last.

People came to listen to Jesus because he was a great teacher, a prophet, a holy man of God and many nurtured the hope that he might be the long-awaited Messiah. So they knew that his parables were not just a good tale. They had to be prepared to dig a bit deeper and think a bit harder, to understand the real message.

Perhaps for the Jews standing in the crowd, there was the gradual realisation that although they were chosen first as God's own people, it

did not mean there would be special privileges. Perhaps for the disciples standing beside Jesus, there was the gradual realisation that although he had chosen them first as special aides in his ministry, it did not mean that there would be special rewards. And there are people in every church throughout the world today who have served Jesus through the life of his church, who will come to realise that it doesn't promise special treatment on the day of account.

Last week, we were reminded of God's boundless forgiveness. This week reminds us of God's limitless capacity for generosity and love. He sees all that we do. He recognises the faith and commitment and work of all his followers. He knows we long to hear the words, well done good and faithful servant. But this parable tells us that we are all loved in the same way, and that every act of service done with a loving and joyful heart, is equally valued in God's kingdom.

We are each called to work to bring in a rich harvest – everyone is welcome to play their part and no one is excluded. We never know when we will be called or what we will be asked to do, but Jesus assures us that all our contributions are valued. And whatever they are, he will reward us with love and the life-giving promise it fulfils.

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