

The Labourers in the Vineyard

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[0 : 00] This story, this parable, this way of explaining the mission and purposes of Jesus and his kingdom is as radical as any other parable that Jesus told.

We are at a vineyard. People knew what a vineyard was. Jesus spoke a lot about the vineyard, and people knew what he was talking about. It was the heart, often, of the economy, and Jesus knew the image of the wine and the vineyard and used that to maximum effect, as he does in this parable. The parable describes the kind of thing that would be commonplace. The grape harvest ripened towards the end of September, followed very shortly on its heels by the rain.

There was an urgency to gather in the harvest, and if the harvest wasn't gathered in before the rains broke, then it was ruined, hence the urgency for all hands to get to work. Any worker was welcome, even if they could only give an hour or two. Why are you standing here? Well, nobody has hired us.

They were waiting to be invited. The men who were standing in the marketplace weren't just any form of idlers that were there. No, far from it.

[1 : 27] These were men that were eager to be hired. They were waiting to be invited in. They were ready. Maybe they had tools in hand. In fact, if we look at Scripture, the evidence of still them being there later in the day, in the heat of the day, shows their willingness to actually want to work. It showed that they wanted to be added to the labourers that had already been hired. These men may also have been maybe from what we would look at, the lower class. There was definitely a class thing going on here of those that were the regular labourers that would go in day by day and those that were waiting on an ad hoc basis to be called in.

What Jesus tells us in this story, this parable, to open our minds, to shock us to the core, is to help us see a greater perspective of how he sees kingdom and not the way we see it.

Who was listening to this? Disciples. Well, definitely the disciples were listening to this, hence we get this parable. And maybe we need to hear this because when we give, when we share, when we labour with him, when we commit our lives, this suddenly falls into place.

Because Jesus points out, you have received great privilege. Being in at the beginning of what me and my father are doing, you've been here for a long time.

Christians, when they effectively sign on, when we step up as followers of Christ, you and I made a decision to enter into a covenant, into a relationship with an agreement that we would seek the kingdom, that we would live and work with him, the vineyard owner.

[3 : 23] Yet Jesus says, but there is more to this purpose in the vineyard. There is more to this. It isn't just about you. It's about all my people.

In later days, others will come. So don't start claiming special privileges. Ouch. Now that hurts.

Because others will want to come in later. They've accepted the invitation.

And I guess we in the church, if I'm honest, have on occasion struggled deeply with that concept. And maybe some of us still do.

Because just as some of those hearing the story did for the first time, and people down through history have struggled, because we have been in for some time.

[4 : 44] We've been in the vineyard. We know the privilege of being in full-time employment, and all the privileges that we have of that, and of the struggle.

I was here first. And this is where it hits to the core, because day after day, I get up, I come here, I am faithful.

So therefore, I have some sort of privilege. After all, I know the vineyard owner well. Do I? Because clearly, these workers didn't.

They didn't know the vineyard owner that well. They didn't know the generosity of what he was seeking to do.

Jesus is throwing out the challenge to our own discipleship. And as John mentioned earlier, as he did to the prodigal son. Because if you remember the older son. Meanwhile, the older son was out in the field.

[5 : 45] The son was working. And when he came near to the house, he heard music and dancing. What on earth is going on here? I didn't know father was having a party. So he called one of the servants to him.

And he said, what's going on? The servant, very excited, said, your brother has come home. And your father has killed the fatted calf. And because he is home safe and sound.

Oh, joy for the older brother. The older brother, it says, became angry and refused to go in.

If you read the scripture again and again, the older brother is the only one who doesn't go to the party. So his father went out and pleaded with him.

But he answered his father and he said, look, all these years I've been slaving for you. Interesting word. When do we see work and serving as slaving in the kingdom of God?

[6 : 49] And he carried on, yet I never disobeyed you. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. So when this son of yours, this son of yours, who has squandered your property with prostitutes, comes home, you kill the fatted calf.

My son, my son, you are always with me. And everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad because this brother of yours, not my son, this brother of yours, was dead and is alive again.

He was lost and he is now found. I remember from my curacy, there was a dear lady, she resolutely sat in the same pew every Sunday morning.

She would come, that was her pew. She in many ways had her own eyes and earned her right every morning to sit in that pew.

It was a small congregation, a very, very small congregation that was there. And they weren't used to seeing new people. But on this Sunday morning, in came a mother with three young children.

[8 : 15] Hallelujah. Suddenly, life was about to be disrupted in the vineyard. Into this scenario, somebody had forgotten to tell this young family what we will call her Edna's Rules.

And Edna's Rules were that you sat there, that you were quiet and you were reverent, whatever that means. These people were totally new.

They hadn't done their research. They should have done before they came, if they were looking for a family-friendly church. And they were sat there and they didn't realise that this was for a select few who had paid, who had toiled and controlled themselves into making it church.

The liturgy started. The choir processed in. Stillness was broken by a child who shouted, I want the toilet! Oh, joy!

Short later, heads were turned. The mother returned. The daughter returned. And by that time, we were well into worship. The sermon was looming. I was thinking, my goodness, I need to praise you this down because I've sat through enough monologues with my own children, shoving raisins into them to try and keep them quiet.

[9 : 41] Tedium, I subjected. And then it happened. The child said, just into a few lines into the service, it was something like from a Hans Christian Andersen thing of the king's new clothes.

We all knew it, but they said it. And she shouted out, I'm bored. I wanted to say, Amen! And so am I. But Edna got there first. She was on her feet and in her Welsh tone with her hands on her hips. She had railed on this child and said, for God's sake, keep that child quiet.

And that was the day I resolved never to do church, but to be church.

Never to do church, but to be the church. The vineyard was a good place to work. He was an amazing employer.

[10 : 45] What was it that the regular hired hands resented in this story, in this parable? You see, what this parable is written, was it written for then or is it written for now? You see, if I take the lid off this parable, I believe this is as fresh today for some congregations as it was the day that it was written.

I had come to a point where I realised that maybe some of us already have, and if you have, then congratulations, because it took me a bit of time to catch on to this, but I am not God's gift to the church.

The church is God's gift to me. And we should live like the kingdom of God is near, because it is our gift. The vineyard is his gift to us.

And the workers who were hired about five in the afternoon came, and each received a denarius.

So when those who had been hired first, they expected to receive more.

Do you know what? That cuts deep with us, doesn't it? Because, you know, are we still sitting comfortably? But each one of them also received, and when they received it, they began to grumble amongst themselves.

[11 : 59] But each one of them, these who were hired only in the last hour, they said, and you have made them equal to us. And you have made them equal to us, who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day.

Perhaps they resented the new energy. Perhaps they resented this fresh expression. Perhaps they resented the new people that they bring in. It's not fair. Also, there is a bit of resentment.

We have been laboring here for ages. We have been hard. We've been giving up our evenings.

We've been going to weekends. We've done our Bible study. And perhaps the hardest pill for some who feel they should receive more from God as a reward is that we have invested our money into this space.

So, who are these new people who come in and benefit from all that we have done? Jesus makes it clear when he talked about a table plan that the last will be first and the first will be last.

I don't presume to go to the top of the table and neither should we. We are all invited. I'm just happy to sit at the table.

[13 : 23] Three things. I sense this in many ways was a warning to his disciples. It's as if Jesus says, you have received the great privilege.

You have received the great privilege of coming in and fellowship early with me. You have spent time with me. You see the way I work. You see the way it runs.

Learn from me. In later days, others will come in. Don't claim special honor and a special place because you were Christians before them.

it's a hard pill. I've had the privilege so many times to be with people who in the last moments of their earthly life have given their life to Christ.

It is the most beautiful moment. There was a beautiful moment this morning as a seven-year-old boy gave his life to Christ this morning and said he wants to be baptized.

[14 : 22] There is no specific time that we will be called into the vineyard. We have to celebrate whatever that time is and if that means we have to adapt and change as we have here at Christchurch down the years.

I understand there's a lot going on on social media. There is I think about 600 people here for a funeral on Thursday. It probably wasn't a funeral that we would recognize in the terms of funeral but for every member here it meant something.

I've never seen so many grown men in tears. If we can't be ourselves here then where can we be ourselves? Number two is we have an established heritage Anglican and Methodist and there is a danger that we believe that Jesus came only for our denomination.

It's a dangerous place to be that Jesus calls all people into his vineyard and this scripture encourages me more and more to work with my fellow Christians for the kingdom.

And finally perhaps the most important in the owner of the vineyard is what we see because the workers didn't know the owner. They didn't know his awesome outstanding and beautiful economy of generosity love and compassion that he didn't want to see people stood outside.

[15 : 48] He didn't want to see people waiting outside. There was a job to be done and so he called them in. What does it matter what they're paid? There's the same reward and yet he calls them in.

And some may enter the kingdom in their final hours and some may have enjoyed the benefits, joys and struggles of serving alongside our saviour for years and years.

Praise God and I wouldn't give up a moment of that and I'm sure you wouldn't either. Surely our desire would to see those who have coming in at whatever stage received the fullness of everything that we have and we wouldn't deny them a moment of that.

But he answered one of them, I am not being unfair to you, friend. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius? Take your pay and go. I want to give the one who was hired last the same as I gave you. Don't I have the right to do what I want to do with my own money? How often have I played God instead of allowing God to be God and do what he does?

[17 : 08] So are you envious because I am generous? I'm not envious when I see people come to Christ.

I'm not envious when I see people coming into relationship. I joked once with somebody and they've never taken me up on it that if it requires me to dress as a white rabbit to bring people closer to Jesus I'd probably do it.

Whatever it takes to invite people into a relationship with Jesus and I'm sure that's true for each and every one of us here. For those that we have prayed long and hard for our loved ones, for those that we know, for those that we've worked with, for those that have stood outside that are waiting, that we long to see come into the depth of that beautiful relationship with Jesus and all that we have.

And that's where this hits the road. And for those of you on the podcast, you can't see I've naturally just held my heart because that was the advice that my dear, dear clergy friend gave to me years ago when I was tempted to fall in love with the church rather than fall in love with Jesus.

and he said to me, Clive, guard your heart. Guard your heart. So we pray today that we may hear God's word afresh maybe for us, that it would engage us, that it would excite us, that it would make us sure of our love for the vineyard owner and definitely not to be envious.

[18 : 50] God, I pray that you would have compassion on us for the times that we have considered this place ours and covered it with our preference and not your generous and compassionate invitation to all.

So let us hear those who are waiting in the marketplace and rejoice when our master invites them in. Young or older, he wants them to come and join the others no matter what the cost, cost, no matter what the cost.

And I sense that that should be our heart too. I am so encouraged and privileged to serve amongst you and with you because that is what we're known for and I pray that we'll be known more and more for that.

Welcome them no matter what age and stage they come. Welcome them to work with us. Why? Because perhaps for them and for all of us time is getting short and there is a salvation work to be done in every heart and every soul before the final harvest time is called.

So this morning I would invite you to just maybe put your hand on your heart as we pray together, as we hear the scripture fresh, to guard our hearts and we hear Jesus' word for us from I think probably what really spoke to me this morning was from Philippians 2.

[20 : 22] Let's pray together. Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and one mind.

Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, rather in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests, but each of you to the interest of the others.

In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus, who being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage.

Rather, he made himself nothing by taking on the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness, and being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death, even death on the cross.

father, we thank you for your generosity to us, we pray that you would make us like minded, in Jesus name, amen. Amen.