Homily 20 September 2026 Sixteenth Sunday after Trinity: Phil 1: 21-end; Matt 20: 1-16

In today's first reading, Paul writes to the christians in Philippi and mentions their "*joy in faith*"(v26). Now it's hard to deny that a sense of joy is part of a christian life. And if that's so, where is the joy in today's Gospel Reading, the story of the Workers in the Vineyard? Let us see.

A man once inherited an oil painting from a distant relative. He looked at it and said '*I don't like this picture. There's too many rough edges and bumpy bits. It needs smoothing down*'. So he set to work with his Black & Decker sanding machine. The picture promptly fell into pieces.

Now then, it's exactly the same with today's Gospel Reading. It's full of strange contradictions. But if we try to remove them, the story falls apart.

We aren't told how large a vineyard business the landowner had. But it was large enough for him to have a manager - something we don't find out until near the end of the story. So why does the landowner do the hiring? Why does he set out so early in the morning to find workers? And what is the "usual daily wage?" Does that mean each worker gets paid the same?

For some people in the time of Jesus, daily life was very hard. If a family man was paid the same as a single man, they might barely exist. Perhaps the landowner gets to the market ahead of the usual hiring time to make sure that those men utterly desperate for work have a chance of getting it.

Then the landowner goes back to the market place at the usual time and hires more people. Perhaps he doesn't want to penalise the men who would expect hiring to start at the normal hour. But he goes on hiring men throughout the day. When it gets to five o'clock, he's still hiring. By now we must be having grave doubts about this landowner's business sense. At just one hour before work for the day ends, a worker would hardly have time to get to the vineyard, be given instructions, and do any useful work.

But there is far more confusion yet to come. The working day ends. The manager at last appears. He is told to pay all the workers the same wage. We must now be convinced that the landowner is totally incompetent in business matters. Not surprisingly, the earliest workers start to grumble. Now we might expect the landowner to react by saying to these grumblers, '*If that's your attitude, don't expect to get any more work from me*'. And he might then say to his manager, '*Write down the names of these men and make sure we never hire them again*'.

But the landowner turns to one of these grumbling workers and begins by saying to him, '*Friend...'*. This is the key verse of the whole parable. We need to ask this question: who has the authority to call this man 'Friend'. And to answer this question, and much more, we must go back to the start.

Our Gospel Reading begins with these words: "*For the kingdom of heaven is like...*". This can be a polite way or a reverential way of saying, '*God is like*'. Or for christians, a way of saying, '*Jesus is like*'. Or at the least, this expression is a way of saying, '*God would act in his world like this*'. Years ago it used to be stated that a parable could only have one meaning. To me this is about as sensible as saying that a play by Shakespeare can only have one meaning. In other words, it doesn't make any sense at all. So you may use any of the interpretations I've suggested. Or you may use your own.

But surely for us gathered here today, the one who has the right to call each and every one of us '*Friend*' is the risen Lord Jesus who will meet us in the Eucharist, God's Feast of Joy. This is the one who does not give each and every worker in the vineyard the wage they deserve. This is the one who out of his generosity gives each and every worker in the vineyard the same wage. Not because they deserve it, but because out of his love for them. He wants to give it, and he hopes they will rejoice to accept it.

One way of summing up what I've been saying is to ask '*What sort of God do you believe in?*' Do you believe in a God who treats people strictly as they deserve? Or do you believe in a generous God? And, will your answers determine what sort of a society you want everyone to live in. This may seem an abstract and impractical way to finish. Not at all.

A few weekends ago, members of various groups masked and clad all in black, blockaded the port of Dover. That will have disturbed some local residents. It should disturb us as well, and for a special reason. Some of the members of these groups have hijacked the words '*Christ is King*'. They chant them at protests. And these words are their expression of a distorted and joyless form of christianity. That is of course simply to state the obvious. But what sort of payment, what wages should they receive?

A modern hymn begins, '*Open our eyes, Lord, we want to see Jesus*'. That may seem too emotional and positively unAnglican. But it makes a simple point. We should pray that the wages these people receive will be a different vision of God. A vision of God reflected in the compassionate and generous face of our Risen Lord Jesus Christ. ***AMEN***.

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