

Working hard for what?

Matthew 20:1-16

I think most of us are aware that when Jesus told parables, he was often using stories that were familiar to his hearers - although he often gave those stories a new twist. That was probably the case with the gospel story of the labourers in the vineyard. The earliest record we have of the parallel Jewish version is from the 4th century A.D. but it may well have been current in Jesus time. The version we have was told at the funeral of a distinguished Rabbi who died very young. At the funeral, his former teacher, Rabbi Ze'era told the story of a King who hired many labourers. There was one particular man who knew his job superbly well. After they had been at work for a couple of hours, the King took the man from his work, and walked with him for the rest of the day, talking of this and that. When it came to the time for paying everyone in the evening, he paid them all the same amount. Just as in Jesus' version of the story, the labourers grumbled that everyone got the same when this man had only worked for a bit of the day. But the King said to them - I have done you no wrong - this man has done more work in two hours than the rest of you have done in the whole day. So, said Rabbi Ze'era, Rabbi Bun bar Hijja has done more in his twenty-eight years than other scholars achieve in a lifetime.

Now that is a very interesting story to compare. Because that implies that there is a correlation between work done, and pay received, even if it isn't in terms of hours, but of output. It is a productivity deal, piece-rates, or whatever. But in Jesus' story, it is meant to show us the generous love of God. We either have that love, or we don't. As T.W.Manson once wrote about this parable - no doubt the workers would have been happy for the late-comers to receive a twelfth part of the wage - but there is no way in which we can imagine receiving a twelfth part of the love of God. We have to keep on being reminded that God's love, like the wine at the wedding in Cana, is not just enough for us but more than we could ever want. I think probably what I have said so far would lead us to see the story as essentially something told against the Jewish teaching of his day about merit in God's sight. It is a marked contrast with that. Maybe that was the context in which Jesus in fact told the story. But we should also be aware of the context in which Matthew tells the story. We always tend to miss these things, because we can only hear a bit of the Bible at once in a service. We should remember that Matthew places this story just after the incident in Matthew 19 where Peter says: "Look, we have left everything and followed you. What will we have?" So in fact, as Matthew tells the story, it is to correct a mistaken point of view from within Jesus' own company, that somehow there would be some correlation between the amount of effort we put in, and what we get out of it. Jesus' teaching is totally consistent on this - we can't work out what God's values are, and therefore we can't make those kind of judgements.

Do you remember that old Collect which talks of the difference between what we deserve and what we

get - we deserve punishment (actually the word would be better translated 'affliction') but by God's goodness we are actually mercifully delivered. That is fair comment, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. We stand before God as justified sinners, not as people with any inherent claim to being right with God. And then that passage referred to one of the places where Paul talks about running a race, where we have the idea of striving after the prize. At first sight you may think this is the opposite of what we have been talking about. But not so - Paul is not actually saying that only one person is going to win in the race of life. That would make nonsense of the whole passage. But what he is saying is that discipleship demands our whole effort. To this extent it ties in with the Jewish version of Jesus' story. Our membership of the Kingdom involves us in making the most of our opportunities, whether they are short-term or long-term. We cannot assume that just because we are part of the race that we don't have to make some effort. It would, after all, but a very strange race if the majority of the participants decided to walk, or stop for a hamburger on the way.

Being in the race is an active, committed business. This is the same message as the parable - we are workers, we are runners, we are *doers* of the word, and not hearers only. The message Jesus gave about the Kingdom was always that it had to be worked for, not waited for. That was the difference now that Jesus had inaugurated the Kingdom. It was no longer a dream for the future, but a present reality which had to be shown to be real to those around. Someone once wrote that the Kingdom of God will not come in a day - it will not be left with the morning milk.

Maybe that runs counter to what many people like today. We are living in the age of convenience foods, and pre-packaged almost everything. Religion is just as capable of being degouted in the same way. Instant religion, available on stream or video, go to church in the comfort of your own home. Dial a prayer on the telephone. Let your fingers do the praying. Have we lost touch with the concept of discipleship that means working for Christ, striving for the Kingdom? Maybe we are so conscious, rightly, that we cannot earn our way into God's favour, that we are people who receive the generous gift of God's love, that we have put to one side the language which is also there in the same parable about work. Many people would be happy to work for the Kingdom, if they were convinced there was something in it for them at the end of the day. But that reduces the whole thing to a business deal, in just the way that Jesus rejected in this parable. Evelyn Underhill has a very good illustration of this. She supposes someone looking up at a great grey stone cathedral, the whole thing, stone and windows a uniformly grey colour. It doesn't look very cheerful. But if you push open the doors and go inside, you find that those supposedly grey windows are in fact brightly coloured stained glass. You cannot see the glory, the colour from outside. You can only sneer and ask what proof there is that it is worth going in. But the only proof you can have is when you go in yourself. We can only know that it is worth labouring in the vineyard, worth striving for the prize in the race when we actually do so. We can receive the grace of God freely, not as we deserve, but as he chooses to give. But equally freely we need then to work and train to fulfil our calling.