

Making Connections

Matthew 20.1-16

We have recently been looking at quite a few parables. Jesus often taught in parables and stories. Can you bring to mind a favourite parable or story that Jesus told? Think of the context of that story. Did it involve care of plants or animals – perhaps sowing, reaping, pruning, or caring for sheep? Or did your parable involve household tasks – sweeping, cooking, salt, yeast, etc.? Did it involve family relationships? Or relationships with friends and neighbours? How about money, wages, or workplace disputes and arbitration? [...]

That is the territory we are in today. Or perhaps we aren't. Maybe money signifies something else altogether.

The ancient labour practices in today's Gospel reading are still around. Modern workers and the self-employed struggle with the gig economy, uncertain payments, and lack of job security.

In this text, we have the late-comer workers who receive a full day's pay. This makes them happy but awakens a sense of further entitlement in the other workers who have spent more hours on the job. We also have the landowner, who pays whom he wishes as he wishes, and is that not his right to do so? The first phrase in the first verse of our reading says, "The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who ..."

And every week we pray that this kingdom will come. We ask God for a world like this landowner. If this prayer is answered, will we be delighted like the latecomers or resentful like those who have laboured willingly but much longer, and see the newly arrived being rewarded first and more abundantly than we anticipated, although receiving exactly what we received, no more and no less?

I understand the joy of the latecomers as they receive what they need even though they could not earn it with a full day of labour. It is an unexpected gift that brings joy to the heart.

I also understand the resentment of the other workers. I spent many years campaigning for equal pay for equal work. Dare I examine whether equal pay might mask other inequalities, such as being unable or prevented from doing equal work for that equal pay?

I understand the right of the one with resources, whether of finance or of grace, to use these gifts as they wish, particularly when it helps the disadvantaged.

And yet, despite these understandings, this parable can be disturbing and does not always sit comfortably. Here are some things that arose for me within this parable and beyond it to other words of scripture.

Firstly, the sense that I needed to step into the shoes of the least attractive in this story – the labourers who were initially satisfied but became unhappy with their lot.

This is a very human response, a bit like the prodigal son's older brother. It is easy to resent rewards unexpectedly granted to others, and to forget the constant privilege and favour that we enjoy. The love of the father for both his sons in one parable and the fair treatment of, and compassion for all his labourers by the landowner in the other can be easily forgotten when we see others favoured. Envy competes with gratitude, and we do not always follow Paul's advice in Romans 12:15 to "Rejoice with those who rejoice; weep with those who weep."

Secondly, "Give us this day our daily bread" from the Lord's Prayer. We are not told to ask for constant security and all that we might want, but for our "right now" needs. Not a storehouse of provision for the future, but just what we might need this day, whether that is literal bread or food for the spirit. The labourers all received what they needed for their daily bread. Can I resent what I have prayed for? Give us this day our daily bread. Us, not just me.

In the same vein, "The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want." I am not thinking of 'want' in the sense of a genuine need, but that when my real needs are met, I can be satisfied with this and not be tormented by constantly wanting more than I need and failing to take joy in what I have by God's grace. The early-start labourers had what they needed. They did not need to feel discontented that they had worked the whole day while others had not.

Those others had, after all, spent the early hours of the day in enforced idleness and fear of scarcity, but they too had ultimately received enough. I can be content. I have enough. Perhaps I can also be content when others, too, have enough.

Thirdly, I was reminded of the constancy of God's goodness, grace and generosity, and, because of that, the need to live a life of praise and thanksgiving in all circumstances. Life can be complicated, with moments of joy, even in times of trial, and moments of sorrow or regret even in times of joy. Philippians 4:4 says, "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice."

In the story Jesus told (Luke 16.19-31) of the rich man and the beggar at the gate, the rich man looks up from Hades and sees Lazarus the beggar in heaven with Abraham. The rich man appeals for mercy but is told that he was aware of the situation in his lifetime and did not act appropriately in response to it. This story could have stopped at the fate of the rich man and the fate of Lazarus, but the rich man's seeing and learning and knowing mattered.

Why do you think that we are told the name of Lazarus but not of the rich man? [...]

Cf. Mathew 7:21-23 ²¹ "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven.²² On that day many will

say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not ... ²³ And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.' (= You never knew me.)

Coming back to the story of the landowner, the later workers are paid first, in sight of those who worked all day. They see and know the difference in the opportunity and in the payment. The story includes the opportunity for the early workers to see and hear, to question and learn, and to prioritise God's blessing and mercy over human custom and human perceptions of justice.

The prophet Amos uses a creation-based mental picture, "Let justice roll down like water and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream." (Amos 5.24)

Justice and righteousness, what is fair and what is right, are not static. They are different in different circumstances, and they are not to be squandered or contained and hoarded, but to flow freely to others. Like the waters of creation, they need to flow so that they can be refreshed and be an everlasting source of life, both upstream and downstream. Freely we receive and freely we should give. In Matthew 10, when Jesus sends out his disciples to share the good news, he declares, "As you go, proclaim this message: 'The kingdom of heaven has come near.' Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons. Freely you have received; freely give." (Matthew 10.7-8) We do not hoard our joy, but share it with others.

These scripture connections helped me to relate to the parable of the landowner. There is probably still more to be found in it. Like the day-labourers, we can continue to question and learn, and in all circumstances to give thanks and praise to God.

To conclude, here is a list of my learning for the day:

- For my relationship with my neighbour: From Romans, *Rejoice with those who rejoice; weep with those who weep.* (Romans 12.15)
- For myself: From Proverbs, Philippians, Timothy, Hebrews and many more, *I can be content. I have enough.* (Various encouraged, e.g. Philippians 4:11-12, 1 Timothy 6:6-8, Hebrews 13:5, Proverbs 30:8-9.), and
- For my relationship with my God: From Philippians, *Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice.* (Philippians 4.4) **Amen.**