God’s freedom to be gracious

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Septuagesima – Mt 20 1-16

(Kids: The professors’ table in Hogwarts’ great hall is called a ‘high table’.) One night at high table at a Melbourne uni college hall, somebody had been to chapel, and today’s parable was the Gospel reading. They were incensed by it, and decided to tell one of the theological teachers how unfair they thought it was. It became quite a heated discussion; something almost unheard of at high table. Soon the people on either side of them got interested, and the theolog had to tell them the parable too.

Then it was on; you should have heard the outrage. Suddenly there weren’t two, but six people arguing about it, then ten, then twelve, and eventually, all twenty-four people – respected academics from the whole range of disciplines – and all arguing furiously about the rights and wrongs of this parable. I had never seen that normally bored, urbane gathering at high table get so animated about anything before.

Back then, my day job was to teach English to refugees and recent immigrants and I was always on the lookout for things that would inspire my students to practise their conversation. That night at high table, I decided this was the very thing for them. Could this happen in my classroom too?

It did, and spectacularly. So I used it with lots of my classes. It was fascinating how different national groups reacted to it. Engineers fresh from the *solidarność* uprising in Gdansk despised the landowner. Paying latecomers the same as the all-day workers was an injustice to them, because, naturally, they saw themselves as the morning crew. Latin Americans saw the landowner using his wealth to inflate his own ego, and humiliate poor, honest workers. Others were

disgusted by the owner's insensitivity – paying the late-comers first made the 'real workers' hope in vain for better. My French students would never speak to such a person.

But each time, when everyone had reported back and the hubbub finally died down, the eldest Vietnamese man in the room would stand to speak for his people on this weighty matter. And was always the same message.

He'd say, 'We think the landowner is a good man. He understands that everyone needs enough money to give their families food and clothes, and he gives it to all of them. He is a good man. The latecomers to the vineyard had been waiting all day for work, and so it was wonderful that their hope was rewarded.'

For some of the other students, this understanding might as well have come from a different planet. But the Vietnamese students always felt a deep kinship with the labourers who'd waited all day for work and were last to be hired. So they always rejoiced with them in their good fortune. That was what life had become for them in Vietnam – no bank account; no job security; no dole; only paid for piece-work if and when it suited an employer. And that's what life's still like for huge numbers of people who can never be sure where the next meal's coming from.

So, back in another thought universe, at high table, scholars argued about justice, and Eastern Europeans and Latin Americans spoke of honour, equality, and just deserts But this parable takes us *with those values* into the realm of grace; into the Kingdom understanding that everything is a gift – everything is given in love, and love cannot be confined to our judgements of people's worth or what they deserve.

Vicky and I were blessed to meet this story in the flesh in Jerusalem. At about 5.15 each morning, the call to prayer would wake us, sounding from the minaret just down Nablus

Road. Morning Prayer in the cathedral was a bit later, so we had a time of quiet meditation to contemplate the sounds of the waking day. One sound always came just after the prayers at the mosque had finished. It was the sound of hundreds of feet; men walking wordlessly from their mosque down towards the old city.

They were headed down to an open market place on the corner of Sultan Suleiman Road and Prophet Street, over the road from the Old City's Damascus Gate. Every day, they waited there from early morning, hoping to be hired as day labourers.

We passed this market place often. We saw the way the men were hired. A truck or a car would pull over to the kerb, and one of its occupants would bellow out the number of labourers they needed. Then several of the job-seekers would run over and jump aboard, and off they'd go.

Where people live under military occupation, large gatherings of men are not viewed favourably. So several times each day, a truckload of young, conscripted soldiers would drive onto the market place and give the would-be labourers a hard time, demanding to see their papers, searching them, shoving and kicking them around. It was all part of a daily ritual of humiliation and oppression.

But still the men came – every day. And many were still there waiting late in the day. Staying all day is dangerous; humiliating – it must have sometimes seemed futile. But they had no other way of providing for their families.

I hear this parable and always imagine what it would mean for those men if a land-owner came back every few hours to rescue more of them from their plight. I imagine what their families would think of such an owner, paying enough for daily bread even to the last ones hired, regardless of the hours worked.

Can we open ourselves to this parable from the late-comers' perspective? Could we receive that vital gift and have it set

us free from the fear that we don't really deserve it? have it set us free from the fear that it'd be taken away from us if only someone knew the truth about us? have it set us free from the fear that we've let the side down somehow, and we're not really worthy?

That's the emotional challenge of this parable. But our faith is not determined by our feelings; because feelings don't determine what is real; God's love does that. The job-seekers who wait all day with no job must feel wretched – failing their needy families. And yet their will to stay all day is a courageous act of faith; that there's always hope. That's a gift; the strength to stay; the refusal to leave. That faith has been given to them, just as their life has been. God's love is what's real.

The Kingdom of heaven is like this landowner…the Kingdom which operates on the principles *this* land-owner works by is a Kingdom which the world desperately needs; a Kingdom where a life is valued for itself; valuable regardless of works or background or length or dis/ability or feelings.

Those poor, desperate day labourers and their families are precious. But unless the one in the car calls out, they have nothing to give – like that thief on the cross beside Jesus who prayed that Jesus would remember him when he came into his Kingdom. Even when these job-seekers can't fulfil their side of our social contract, this parable promises them the gift of abundant life because God cherishes them – cherishes all.

When people get this, it's amazing. https://www.sbs.com.au/news/this-doctor-gives-free-health-care-to-struggling-temporary-visa-holders-in-australia

So we pray with Jesus – let the Kingdom come here too. Amen

Insights from the commentators noted by Ulrich Luz.

Since the Mishnah calculates that a person needs a minimum of

200 denarii per year in order to exist, this income presupposes that a day laborer was able to find work at least 200 days in a year and that he furthermore did not have to support a family. One denarius could buy 10 to 12 small, flat loaves of bread; 3 to 4 denarii 12 litres of wheat (from which one could make about 15 kilograms of bread) or a lamb; 30 denarii a slave's garment; 100 denarii an ox. In view of these prices the day laborers had a hard life (*M. Šeb.* 8.4; *m. Šeqal.* 4.9; *m. Menaḥ.* 13.8; *m. Arak.* 6.5). [1]

As the farmer dealt with the last workers, so Jesus deals with those who by normal standards have no claim on God. In the name of God he affirms the sinners who do not keep the law; the women and the poor, who for various reasons cannot keep the law in its entirety; the sick, who are excluded from the community; and the unlettered *am ha aretz* (people of the Land), who are ignorant of the law (Luz).[2]

The parable is most likely directed against human efforts to link God's justice and God's graciousness in such a way that one becomes the standard for the other. In that case either God *may* no longer be gracious, since the principle of justice forbids it, or he *must* be gracious to all, since the principle of equality dictates that all have an equal claim to graciousness. Thus the parable is focused on a just God's *freedom* to be gracious. It does not offer a new system of unmerited graciousness that will take the place of the normal standards of a justice that grants to all what they have earned. Instead, the standard values are "disrupted" by the appearance of God's love, and they thereby lose their deadly universal validity. "I came not to call the righteous but sinners" (Mark 2:17). This description of Jesus' activity neither denies nor excludes the righteousness of the righteous. It simply brings God to those who need him, the sinners.

Finally, the scope of the parable includes a new attitude

toward one's neighbor which the experience of grace makes possible. Those who make God's justice the dominant principle and do not permit his graciousness to appear alongside it are incapable of solidarity. With his direct question in v. 15 the owner of the vineyard makes the "spokesman" aware that the *principle* of achievement leads to arrogance toward those who have earned less and envy toward those who have earned more or who have been rewarded unjustly. Part of the parable's point—not as the result of a theoretical insight but as a practical consequence of one's own experience—is a new sense of solidarity with those who are not well off but to whom God is gracious.[3]

Every "human claim shatters on the freedom and the greatness of God's grace." (Bornkamm) Even earlier H. J. Holtzmann had said: "This remarkable parable deals a death blow to the concept of reward by making use of it" and by letting concepts such as reward and achievement "sink under the weight of a religious idealism to which all reward no longer appears as legal recompense but only as a gift, as overflowing grace, as the reward of grace." Finally, for Joachim Jeremias two worlds are at odds in this parable: "the world of merit, and the world of grace; the law is contrasted with the gospel."[4]

[1] Luz, U. (2001). *Matthew: a commentary* Vol 2. (H. Koester, Ed.) (p. 530). Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg.

[2] Luz, p. 533.

[3] Luz, p. 534.

[4] Luz, p. 527.