

## Sermon on Matthew 20: 1-16 Workers in the Vineyard

When we look at the biblical passages suggested by the Methodist lectionary as Gospel readings for this month, September seems to be the month of the parables...

...the month of stories. Poetry season, if you like.

Remember when Carol Seckel preached about the stories of the lost sheep and the lost coin? How Edith played the part of this woman searching so thoroughly for what she'd lost and celebrating with her friends when she found it?

Remember Linda last Sunday talking about the master and the manager, this difficult story that ends with the statement 'no one can serve two masters'?

It is story time this month, story time today – in more ways than one.

Jesus spent much of his time telling people stories. (The word story sounds so much nicer than "parable" which these stories are usually called).

Jesus' stories were meant to give people a glimpse of a different world; the world of God. And Jesus' stories were meant to help people look at themselves and the world in which they live, and see things through God's eyes.

Often it wasn't the religious people, or the good, respectable people who were so attracted to Jesus, but the people whom others ignored or despised, because they were poor, or unclean in the terms of Jewish law.

Not only did Jesus welcome such people, he ate with them.

He invited them to meals, sat with them and shared his food with them.

By doing that, Jesus was treating the lost, those at the lowest level of society, as equals, as friends. And the way he claimed to be teaching the ways of God did not please the religious and political leaders at all.

Jesus' behaviour broke all the rules.

And in one of the stories he told, he even spoke about a person who broke the rules – at least the rules of what was expected.

He talked about a landowner and the workers in his vineyard.

He told people little scenes from everyday life, speaking about human life and God at the same time. The stories from the everyday life of the poor and ordinary people became a window through which those listening were invited to see God. Long before and long after Jesus' time there was a living culture of telling stories in Judaism. This was how people tried to describe and explain life and talk about God.

These stories were always open; didn't nail anything down.

They were an offer – to listen, to reflect, to seek and find.

And Jesus' stories usually took place in the world of the slaves, the day labourers and the hard-working women and children.

The story of the workers in the vineyard describes an everyday scene from the working world of those days.

Early in the morning unemployed men gather in the market place and wait for the working day that is beginning.

A landowner wants the grapes picked in his vineyard, typical seasonal work.

Day labourers were more practical and less expensive for landowners than slaves. Slaves he would have had to buy and then care for – interested of course in their further capacity for work.

If you were a slave, you received at least a minimum of bread and care, whereas day labourers were a kind of slaves at their own risk. Which means: there were days without income and without bread, and because nobody owned you, nobody would make sure you had something to eat to keep you going. There were days of disease, and because nobody owned you, nobody was interested in your health – even if it was only to exploit you again after your recovery...

Day labourers were born free, but poverty enslaved them just the same. The living conditions of day labourers were more miserable than those of slaves.

Jesus shows a very precise knowledge of the working conditions of day labourers. The parable gives all the important details:

First of all the landowner hires men for the whole working day, from dawn to dusk. He concludes a contract by mentioning the amount of money they will be paid. They shake hands. Confirmed.

The day labourers know that they will be paid in the evening, because the Hebrew Bible requires this of the employer. And most employers observe this law.

Our text supposes that one denarius is something like the absolute minimum to survive; however we may wonder whether it would also feed the labourer's wife and children...!?

The employer in Jesus' story then hires further labourers in the course of the day; at nine o'clock, at noon, at three o'clock and at five o'clock in the evening. Those hired last only have about an hour's work ahead of them; then the sun will set.

The landowner does not mention any amount of money to the second group, but indicates only that he will pay them a fair wage. He does the same with those who are hired late...

The last group can hardly expect money – perhaps a handful of grapes to take home...

The employer seems to calculate in stages the amount of work that still needs to be done... He is careful not to hire too many people right from the beginning. He doesn't want to pay more wages than absolutely necessary.

The pressure on the workers to work quickly and effectively can well be imagined...

In the second part of the story a steward is mentioned who supervises the work and pays out the wages. And then the evening scene is described...

The landowner, the employer, must have completely changed his mind... he seems to have a totally different attitude.

He is – in fact – unrecognisable.

*When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, 'Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.'*

*When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage.*

*Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage.*

*And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, saying, 'These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.'*

*But he replied to one of them, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage?*

*Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?'*

The employer pays everyone the full day's wages regardless of how long they have worked. He seems to see and understand that even those who are unemployed and find little work need the denarius in order to survive. The denarius was the minimum wage a person needed. It would last a person a day...

In paying these wages the landowner is going by people's needs rather than by their achievement. He would of course have had the right to pay far less – or, as I said before, just let those hired last go home with some of the fruit.

What we see next is just so human. (Would we react any differently?).

Those who have worked a long time come and protest. They only see their own achievement and not the needs of the others. Whatever has changed the landowner's mind has not yet touched their spirit.

And the ending of the parable is an open one... with the wordless invitation of the employer to those who have worked a long time, to open their hearts and grant the unemployed the denarius they so desperately need to survive.

What starts as an everyday scene becomes the overthrow of the current rules. In a society orientated to profit, the employer changes his behaviour completely. Not a word is said about God.

Only the introduction to the parable mentions God. There is mention of the kingdom of heaven, of God and no one else being king on the earth, that's all. Everything else is up to people's own thinking and understanding.

*(pause)*

Whatever goes through your mind now...

this story Jesus told teaches those who hear it to see the misery of the unemployed; to see the pressures of an economy orientated to profit; to see the victims of this economy – those who are standing unemployed in the market place from six in the morning to five in the evening, still waiting.

Here and now it may not be the market place, where people wait and suffer... it is asylum seekers' homes, the offices of the authorities, waiting rooms at surgeries and hospitals, prison cells, social advice bureaux, and all the different "Ämter" which the under-privileged in our society depend on so completely.

They wait from dawn to dusk – not much different from their biblical sisters and brothers who didn't know how to find enough (supplies) to feed the hungry mouths of a normal size family of their day.

Nevertheless: our parable encourages people to think that change is possible!

This employer changes his whole concept of life. His orientation to profit, income and money at any price vanishes for the sake of the survival of the poorest.

And those who witness this change, those who'd worked long and complain, are invited to show solidarity, understanding and joy...

At no time does the parable of the workers in the vineyard draw conclusions to tell us what to do. It presupposes that whoever hears it, will relate to it and find ways to establish justice in a similar way as it is established in the story.

Small steps to support others to survive...

What could they be for us?

But back to the time, when this story was first told:

It is not only but partly because of such stories that Jesus had to die.

Not only because he told them, but because he lived them.

He befriended all those who nobody had employed... the poor, the sick, the outcast. And they understood his story best!

They understood: if life is meant to be as in this story, if God acts even more mercifully than this landowner – which God definitely does – then everybody will receive a fair wage, then everybody will have enough – not only to survive but to live life in all its fullness – and in dignity – and in peace – no matter how much the individual can achieve or has achieved.

If life in community, life in our society, is meant to be like in this story, then we all have a future to look forward to and a purpose that makes life worth living.

Jesus challenged the people of his time. He provoked the upper class with his talk of God and his mercy and justice, but he comforted the poor and oppressed with his vision of equality and his confirmation of God's goodness and mercy, which we all need for our lives.

“Or do we begrudge his generosity?”

Then and now many people are waiting desperately and full of hope for Jesus' story to come true.

I don't have fixed answers to how this could happen. I only see the many people who are waiting for a life that is not dominated by achievement and profit, but ruled by the needs and desires of every individual human being – no matter who they are...

How much do you need so that you and your family can live – in terms of dignity, bread, time, freedom...?

That is the question God would want us all to ask, in order to make his kingdom come true.

And he (or she) wants us to ask this question in community, because it is only together that we can make smaller or bigger steps towards the justice shown to us in this unusual story.

When God is around, be prepared for surprises.

Be prepared to think again about what is right and just and fair.

Be prepared to change your mind about what goodness and generosity mean.

Be prepared to see other people in a new light.

Allow God time and space in this world, and you never know what might happen... Amen