

It is amazing to me that when we are giving a set of readings each Sunday by the lectionary, how much the theme of those readings come up in the course of the week – it may be that its because I am thinking of them – or maybe God is helping us to unpack what something might mean. For the last few weeks now all our readings, particularly from Matthews Gospel have focused on parables which describe what the reign of God – what the kingdom of God and true justice, grace and mercy might look like. And despite this effort Jesus places on this teaching, humanity seems to always struggle with this concept – and I have spent a great deal of time wondering why this is!

There is so much in the world at the moment which is outside of our individual control and it can feel scary and frustrating – and for many results in anger – but how we seek justice when we feel this way is at the heart of the readings that we hear on this 15<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Trinity. From Jonah who thinks God is too nice – to Paul who is wrestling with death and the hardships he faces and then there is:

The parable of the workers which we hear in Matthew today records the story of a landowner employing day labourers – all day he takes on anyone who turns up – at the end of the day – all are paid the same – regardless of the work that they have done. This parable has often been used as an example of the welcome of God’s Kingdom and that all will be treated the same, regardless of the amount of time they have served God. I have been very challenged this week by an article written Stanley Saunders<sup>1</sup> who suggests that this is not what the parable is about at all. Rather he suggests that the parable is an example of the kind of false justice that Jesus is trying to warn his disciples of falling in the trap of.

In the parable, at the end of the day, while the workers - who are all day labourers - are all paid the same, they all return to the same level of uncertainty. Tomorrow they will need to wait and see if there is any chance of further employment. The fact that so many have worked today, suggests that less work will be available tomorrow. It is true that, at one level, the landowner treats the workers with equality. But at the same time, Saunders points out that this supposed justice is cast into question by the landowner’s actions and words from the point the payments begin to be made. He stipulates that those hired last will be paid first (Matthew 20:8). Why? This arrangement serves no evident purpose but to make his gesture of “equality” evident to those who worked all day. If the goal is really to create equality among the workers, the landowner could do so without making a public display – he seems to be wanting a reaction. The balance of power in this parable does not change anything for the workers and those who are most vulnerable. While the workers will have left happy, they were paid, the landowner in these interactions takes away some of their dignity.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=4574](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=4574)

In all the parables we have heard over the previous weeks, Jesus has been trying to help the disciples, and us, notice that things need to change. Justice is false if it brings about envy and division, rather than wholeness and healed relationships. It is more likely that this parable is a warning to us all that we are mindful that justice is about wholeness.

At the moment, we are all having lots of conversation about what is fair and just, about how there is equality for all, and even who is excluded from the conversation. These conversations raise many important questions : what does real equity look like? What is fair about what's going on right now? What does God want from us, expect from us, and look for from us?<sup>2</sup>

There aren't any easy answers to these questions. The readings we have explored in Mathew's Gospel today and in previous week invite us to see that for any of these conversations to have meaning we have to start by forming relationships – being willing to share our story, and for many of us , particularly those of us who have a lot of power making space to hear their stories. It is not easy, and it can be challenging.

But like Jonah, whose story we also hear today – we must learn that justice is not about 'me' as an individual, justice is about community. It is not my rights that come first, but our responsibilities. Justice is expressed through vulnerability, love and grace and it starts with listening. Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.davidlose.net/2020/09/pentecost-16-a-not-about-deserving/>