

Pentecost 16
24/9/2017

Mark the Evangelist

Jonah 3:10-4:11
Psalm 145
Matthew 20:1-16

Graced work

[There is something is very troubling about God's economy. It's bad enough that those who work only an hour are paid the same as those who've worked the whole day. But the point is made without apology, and events unfold so that the unfairness is emphasised and made unmistakable to all. The landowner deliberately pays first those who've worked only an hour, so that there's no possibility that anyone misses the point. We're expected to be offended. Now, clearly what we have here is not a proposal for an economic or industrial relations policy, but a statement about what it is to deal with the God who sent Jesus. The concept which is usually thrust forward here to help us understand what is going on is "grace". God freely does with people as he wishes, and he wishes to bless. But we need to think more deeply than such an all-too-easily applied theological label as "grace" might suggest.]

One thing we understand straightaway in Jesus' story of the workers in the vineyard is that those who've worked the whole day are horrified at what has happened. At the same time, we are supposed to see that the all-dayers have received exactly what they contracted for, and so the landowner rightly rejects their objections. It's his money. If he wants to fritter it away with such extravagant payments, he may. And so we might see that the parable points an accusing finger at those pious and upright people who would deny that God can be gracious even to those who have not contributed much in God's "vineyard". The point seems simple enough: do not presume to limit God's freedom to be gracious to whomever he chooses.

But this is still all too simple if we think the point is merely "grace to late comers". For if God shows "grace" to those who start work at 9am, noon, 3 and then 5 o'clock, what does God show to those who began work at the start of the day (6am)? Simplistic talk about the grace which God shows to the late starters actually turns his relationship to the early starters into a *graceless* contract of work and reward. The late starters were told: "go into the vineyard, and you will be paid whatever is right". But the early starters were later reminded, "did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Did we not have a *contract*?" On this reading, while the late starters receive *more* than they would normally be due, it seems that the early starters receive *only* what they were due. The late-starters have been gratuitously *blessed*, but early starters have been *paid*.

Simplistically naming as "grace" God's blessing of the late-comers leaves us with a problem: some seem to receive what they need on account of what they have done, and some receive irrespective of what they have done. If the lucky latecomers get into God's good graces simply because God chooses to bless them and does not require that they do as the all-day workers have been doing, what does that say about the work the all-dayers have been doing? Or, more generally, if grace is overwhelming, what is the value of work?

The only answer which makes any sense of the paradox of work and grace – here and elsewhere – is an extraordinary one: the work we are given to do is the form of the grace we receive. The lavishness of the landowner shows clearly that he doesn't measure the workers' value by the *quantity* of work they do. Yet all *have* been put to work. At the same time, the landowner is able to bless the workers whether they've put in a full day's work or not, for he clearly doesn't *need* what they produce in order to bless. If the *owner* does not need the work to be done in order to pay the workers, then the work must actually be for the *workers'* sake, and not for his.

The “grace” here, then, is not the generous payment at the end of the day. The grace is the invitation to see our lives as lived in the vineyard of *this* master. Here, the payment is not *for* the work done but is the *sign* of what they have been engaged in. It is easy to read this story as a parable of the “end-times”, so that the real pay-day is at some time yet to come. But the very opportunity of working in this vineyard, *now*, is itself the grace. The early-starters thought they were merely toiling away, earning what was really a freely-given blessing. Their error is not that they moaned about the others being blessed. It was that they thought that they themselves worked *in order* to be *paid*. (Cf. the parable of the two sons [the prodigal son, Luke 15.11ff], and in particular the protests of the elder son at his father's response to the return of the younger, and the father's response to this objection.) In fact their work was their pay, only they did not experience it as such. The day's pay is the *sign*, the *meaning*, of the work which has been done, not the *consequence* of it. The work to which God's people are called is blessed work because in *it* – in the concrete and tangible necessities of daily life – the kingdom of God becomes present.

The parable challenges us: Reassess your understanding of the work you have been given to do. You are engaged in the work of grace. What you do is a participation in the very act of creation. What else is grace but the calling into being of things which do not exist? A life lived in grace is no different.

More typically, work is associated with fear. We fear that the work we do will not be good enough to warrant our pay. We fear what others will think if we don't get it just right, or even fear our own judgement of ourselves. We fear for our prospects if it seems that neither present nor future work will deliver the kinds of resources we think we need for life. We that what we are required to do might not, in the end, actually matter.

But if, as in the parable, the owner of the business of life doesn't really care how much we produce but pays us regardless, the fear in the labour of our lives disappears. Work becomes activity *in* grace – even “toiling in the hot sun”. Work becomes something we are freed for, rather than by which we are bound.

Divine grace is not about our standing before God in some as-yet unspecified future, receiving *then* our daily bread. It is about God's standing before us now, inviting us to work in the vineyard, redefining for us what we are doing, sustaining us in that work with the manna of grace. The work God gives us to do is central to the way God blesses us. This is the case for us as we make our way through Christian life by attending worship or giving of our resources as we are able. It's the case for a church council which is confronted with the challenges of maintaining properties, paying stipends, making ends meet, growing congregations. It's the case for a congregation having to deal with the revelation of abuse in its midst. It's the case for an individual who finds herself moved to share faith with a neighbour. It is the case for the difficulties of coming to terms with our property challenges here, and for the hard work of Hotham Mission. It is the case for the struggle of dealing with overwhelming illness and grief.

How often these things are for us imagined as sheer burdens we have to bear. And, if we manage to bear them, how often we then secretly imagine ourselves worthy of reward. But if Christian existence is a burden which we bear in order to be rewarded by God, or by those around us, then it is not *Christian* existence. Taking up the cross, as Jesus invites us, is not a matter of subjecting ourselves to heavy burdens in order to achieve righteousness. The cross is a lens through which we see what a true life is like, in the world and before God.

What do we see through this lens? The life of Jesus himself, grace in the midst of ungrace, given to us our very own life. We see that we are co-workers with Christ in the vineyard which will be God's heaven. We are co-creators with God. Our work is a share in the calling to order of the chaotic world around us, a calling to fullness of the void of meaningless effort.

That is the blessing of the gospel. It is this to which we invite others, and it is because they will also be blessed in such work that we celebrate should they join us.

So let us, then, rejoice that God gives us a life to live, work to do, a vineyard in which to labour. And let's get on with it, looking to see what good God might do with our efforts.

Amen.
