

Exodus 16:2-15
Psalm 105
Philippians 1:21-30
Matthew 20:1-16

The grace of work to do

There is something 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 not only is the point made without apology, 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. *But* 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, from this distance, we are supposed to see that the parable points an accusing finger at those pious and upright people who would limit God's grace to those much less pious and upright people God nevertheless still blesses. The point seems simple enough: do not limit God's freedom to be gracious to whomever he chooses.

But this is still all too simple if we think the point is simply "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 he show to those who began work at the very start of the day? 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 are due, it would seem that the early starters receive *only* what they were due. The late-starters have been gratuitously *blessed*, but early starters have been *paid*.

Does this mean that the early starters have earned God's favour, that they are owed what they originally bargained for? Simplistically naming as "grace" God's blessing of the late-comers leaves us with a problem: some receive what they need on account of what they have done, and some receive irrespective of what they have done. Now, 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?

The only answer which makes any sense of the paradox of work and grace here is an extraordinary one: the work we are given to do is part 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 is, then, not simply the generous payment at the end of the day. The grace is the opportunity to work in this vineyard. And the payment is not on account of the work but is the sign of what they have been engaged in.

We tend to read this story as a parable of the "end-times", so that the real pay-day is at some time like our death. But the very opportunity of working in *this* vineyard, *now*, is something which is itself the result of grace. What the early-starters missed was that they were working in the vineyard of *this* landowner. They thought they were merely toiling away, earning what was really a freely-given blessing.¹ 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*. In fact their work was part of their pay, only they did not experience it as such. The day's pay is the *meaning* of the work which has been done, not the *consequence* of it. That is, the blessings of grace are not for some end time. They are for now. The work to which God's people are called is blessed work because the kingdom of God *has* become present – *in the very calling to this work itself*.

So the parable challenges us: reassess your understanding of the work you have been given to do. Work is for us often closely associated with fear, whatever sort of work it might be. 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 will deliver the kinds of resources we think we need for life. Having so feared and toiled, we do not receive *grace* when we succeed, but a *reward* because we've triumphed in the face of what threatens us. If we do not triumph in our efforts, of course, then all that work is found to be in vain.

But if, as in the parable, the owner of the business of life doesn't really care how much you produce, the fear in the work of our lives disappears. Work becomes something for our benefit, and not for our detriment – even "toiling in the hot sun". It becomes part of the blessing, and not the precondition for the blessing. Work becomes something we are freed for, rather than bound for.

God's grace is not about our standing before God in some as-yet unspecified future, but about God's standing before us now, inviting us to work in the vineyard, offering to redefine for us what we are doing. The work God gives us to do is part of the way God blesses us. This is the case for us as we make our way through Christian life by attending worship, giving of our resources as we are able, sharing faith when it's appropriate. 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.

¹ 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.

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 because our song is freedom.

The payment the workers received is clearly not payment for the work done, but payment which characterises or summarises the *meaning* of the work which has been done. And that meaning is that the work itself was – is – a gift and blessing. We will only begrudge the blessing which others receive if we believe that we've earned the right to our pay, and it was in fact no blessing to be put to work by this master.

Christian life is not easy today. Faith is widely misunderstood. Congregations are under siege of falling numbers and escalating costs. Denominations are beginning to crack under the strain of too few workers to maintain old structures. It's easy in this situation to think that if we pull through, God will owes. This will only make sense if God has given us nothing to this date, does nothing for us in our labours; again, this would not be the gospel.

If it is all too hard, done without joy, then we are not living the gospel. The good news of Jesus Christ is that the kingdom of God draws near whenever Christ himself does, and Jesus draws near in the Word written and preached, in the sacraments, in those in need who cross our path. “Thy kingdom come” is a prayer about today, not the end-times. We are co-workers with Christ in the vineyard which will be God’s heaven. That is the blessing of the gospel, and it is that to which we invite others, and it is because they will also be blessed in that work that we celebrate should they join us.

So *let us*, then, rejoice that God gives us a life to live, tasks to do, this vineyard in which to work. And let's get on with it.

Amen.
