‘The Parable of the Compassionate Employer’

By Rod Matthews

My message today is a further instalment about the nature of the Kingdom of God. It’s found in Mat 20:1-16 and your Bible probably has a subhead which calls this section “The Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard”. Let me say up front that the sub-head is wrong in its emphasis. The main point is NOT about the workers. May I also say that this parable is not a favourite of the union movement. The average diehard union member would see the landowner in this story as someone who was quite unfair in their remuneration of his workers. We’ll find out if they have a case.

Mat 20:1-16 NIV This parable should really start with the last verse of the previous chapter. In fact our parable is bracketed with the same saying: The first will be last and the last will be first. This is the sentence that introduces the parable and also the one at the end of the parable. In this section of Mat-thew’s gospel Jesus has been talking about the reversals which shock people when looking at the gospel from a human perspective. God’s standards are very different from ours. So let’s see if we can discern what Jesus is teaching in this parable.

Firstly we read what it says in Mat 20:1 – “The Kingdom of heaven is like…… and immediately we start focussing on the workers. Yet the very first sentence following - spoken from the mouth of Jesus himself - says otherwise. It’s not about the workers at all although, of course, they have a part in the story. The whole point of the parable is to give us further understanding about the Kingdom by pointing us
clearly to the landowner, the master. The focus is all on him. We have a similar problem with the parable of the prodigal son – or lost son as it might be sub-headed. Apart from the fact that it is actually about two lost sons, in reality the focus is all about revealing the nature of the father. So a little lesson to start with is not to treat the sub-heads that were added later in some Bibles as inspired scripture.

Back to the vineyard. The landowner needed workers. In a nearby village, there was a labour market, we could call it, where men needing work would wait to be hired. The landowner went there early in the morning to hire some labourers. Note, he did not send his supervisor or steward even though he is mentioned later. He went himself. Interesting – and unusual. He made a deal with the people he hired at 6 am to pay them a denarius. A denarius was the standard, expected and reasonable day’s wage. A Roman soldier got paid at the same rate. One denarius for a day’s work. It’s fair and just. The workers did not object or complain but with complete acceptance, went off to work, to do the best they can in the hope that they might be hired for a second day or perhaps longer.

It’s set in a Middle Eastern environment and the story is filled with questions, surprises and passions. The landowner rather oddly, hires workers at five different times during the day. So he heads to the market area where men needing work assemble each day hoping for a job, even if just for one day. This is a custom that still survives to this day, according to Kenneth Bailey in his book “Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes”. The question that arises at this point is why is the owner himself actually there? Why not send his trusted steward or manager to handle this as is normally the case? His

manager is competent and experienced. Why does the owner return every three hours looking for more labourers. But this land-owner goes back every three hours to look at the state of things and finds other workers waiting who have not yet been hired. By 3.00 pm he was driven to check the unemployment market again in the hope that it would be empty. To the master's amazement and dismay it wasn't, so he hired a few more workers.

Each time, we can deduce that the workers expected that they will be paid a just wage. The amount is not explained. What is justice in this case? The parable does not answer the question. What is justice for an unemployed man willing to stand all day in a public place and endure the humiliating or pitying glances of those passing by who are financially secure? Finally, one hour before sundown, the master returns to the market for a fifth time where he finds some deeply depressed workers still waiting for employment. All that remains for the brave few left in the market is the humiliation of returning home to an anxious wife and hungry children with the bad news of another day of frustration and disappointment. When the master asks them why they are still standing there doing nothing, they reply, "no one has hired us." In effect they are saying we are eager and willing to work, ready and able to work, and we have not given up. The master then offers them the very thing they desperately want – a job. So he sends them into his vineyard and.....note..... there is no promise to pay them anything. But they accompany him back to his vineyard.

An hour later, at the end of the day, five different groups of workers are busily employed. The first group has a contract – a specific and fair amount for a day's work. Three further groups were employed in three-hour periods and promised an unspecified amount that was "just" on the pay scale. The last group was promised nothing. Why does the owner, himself, go backwards and forwards from his property to the market place every three hours throughout the day? I think we can clearly see from his efforts and his response to the needs of the men he found waiting there, that he was driven by compassion for the unemployed. In fact his understanding of and feelings for their circumstances is displayed with the final group where he could have given them some money and told them to go and buy some food for their families and go home. But he refuses to humiliate them by placing them on relief. Instead, he gives them the one thing that they so desperately want – work – and dignity.

Now comes the big surprise of the parable. Now the owner sends his estate manager to handle the wage payments. There's no record of his involvement up till now. Then the master tells the manager to "pay **the wage**" to the workers. This is a specific term that means a full day's pay. And thirdly, he tells the manager the order in which to make the payments - to pay those who came most recently first. While the others watched and waited. Obviously, the master fully intended that all the workers should observe the grace that he had extended to all the others. You can imagine the rising tension in the group as each group who worked more hours received the same as the ones who had just been paid. But that is not the issue here because no one was underpaid. The parable presents a group of workers who were overpaid. The parable focuses on an event filled with amazing grace, which is resented by those who feel they have earned their way to more. Finally a spokesman for the 12-hour group voices their complaint. "Not fair" he shouts, "we should receive more". The complaint comes from those who have been justly paid but who cannot tolerate grace. "You have made them equal to us who have slaved through the heat of the day." To their market-oriented minds, their

worth as human beings is directly related to how much they are paid. Grace is not only amazing, it is also, for some, absolutely infuriating.

The master then addresses the spokesman for the angry workers who think they have been robbed of what is owed to them. “He replied to the one speaking for the rest, ‘Friend, I haven’t been unfair. We agreed on a fair wage for a day’s work, didn’t we? So take it and go. I decided to give to the one who came last the same as you. Can’t I do what I want with my own money? Are you going to get stingy because I am generous?’

What happens next? Well, like most of Jesus’ parables, it doesn’t say how it all ended. The whole idea is that the listeners are left hanging, having inserted themselves as being present in the story, they now must finish the drama in the nitty-gritty of their own lives. What would they do? How would they react? How would we react?

The final words of wisdom that Jesus adds are “The first shall be last and the last shall be first” just as he had warned them at the start of this parable. In the Middle East a traditional landowner

always uses a steward or manager to manage the estate. He’ll hand out instructions and the beginning of the day and expect a report at the end of the day. To make the trek himself from the farm to the market and back five times in a day is unheard of. That is the manager’s job.

Then, against the expectation of his class in society, the master in the parable does not remain aloof. His compassion leads him to go to the needy and hurting himself and thereby demonstrate his deep concern and love for the “poor”. Jesus is describing his own ministry. Self-giving takes on the form of offers of costly love.

So going back to the beginning, we are told that the “Kingdom of heaven is like a landowner….” The focus is on the nature and heart and actions of the landowner, the master. Since the master

is the one inviting people into his kingdom, and offering them salvation, perhaps we could look at the whole scenario as the work of Jesus down through the ages, some being called early in the process and some later. But all are offered an equal place in the family of God. Costly grace is offered to every-one, regardless of where in the history of the world they might have lived and worked, and what they might have endured in the process.

And there is a warning inherent in the parable too: that there are those who seek to control the master’s grace and to pressure him into denying grace to the needy who have done their best. As the recipients of his displeasure, they are told to leave.

The master sets the example of someone who sacrifices for the workers, who is willing to go to and from the market in the heat of the day, to rescue the needy workers who are seeking work in the only way open to them. The message is clear to those who consider themselves righteous as did the Pharisees in Jesus’ day. They thought God’s grace should be uniquely available to the “righteous” who keep the law. But Jesus was constantly welcoming sinners into fellowship with himself. Does God love both sinners and the righteous with the same love. Indeed he does.

There is no doubt that Jesus was responding to the criticism that came from the Jewish religious authorities that Jesus was wasting his efforts on the wrong kind of people. The fact that he reached out to those who were disparagingly called “tax collectors and sinners” caused much resentment amongst those who had devoted their lives to observing the Torah.

The labourers who came at the11th hour (5 pm) were obviously the equivalent of the "tax collectors and sinners" who were answering God's call rather late in the day. And those who protested were undoubtedly the Pharisees and teachers of the law who imagined that their special merit entitled them to special rewards from God. Like Jesus, the church must also operate on the basis that every-one is in need of the gospel of the Kingdom - and be sure not to neglect the marginalised as well as the privileged.

It is a hard lesson to learn for those who believe that works are what gain you credence in the house of God. There is a response to the love of God – and that response is a reflecting of the love of God out to others. It's not a scorecard on which we are assessed for entry into God's family. God's standards are just and generous, not miserly. God keeps his promises. We should learn to do likewise, leaning towards the generous side in all our dealings with people, and not succumb to resentment when we observe God's generosity in action towards others. God saves us all by his grace – and it is not related to what we deserve.

And for those who cannot see this from the perspective of the love and grace of God, they will have to live with the fact that those who think of themselves as "the first" may well be last.

But in case you think that God does not notice the sacrifices his people have made, you should read the last verses, 27 to 29, of the previous chapter. An assignment for you. It adds to the broad sweep of Jesus' teachings here.