

Sheffield United Reformed Churches - Team Ministry worship for individuals or families
Sunday 20th September 2020 at 10:30 am
16th Sunday after Pentecost

Call to Worship

The only thing in life for me is to have and to know Christ.
What is death to me? It is to gain even more!

Hymn R&S 76

The Lord is king! Lift up your voice, O earth, and all you heavens, rejoice;
from world to world the song shall ring: 'The Lord omnipotent is king!'

The Lord is king! Who then shall dare resist his will, distrust his care
or quarrel with his wise decrees, or doubt his royal promises?

One Lord one kingdom all secures: he reigns, and life and death are yours;
through earth and heaven one song shall ring: 'The Lord omnipotent is king!'

Prayers of Worship, Confession and Thanksgiving

Lord, we give you thanks and praise. Lord, we worship you. Lord, we acknowledge that you are the source of all our strength, wisdom and meaning. To you belongs all honour, power and glory. By you and through you, all things have been made and in you all things hold together. Everything in heaven and on earth is yours.

You are the beginning of all things and the end of all things. You are the first-born from among the dead and all hope rests in you through your glorious resurrection. We praise you as Head of your people, the Church, for all the fullness of God's abundant life resides in you. You have called us to join you in your work of reconciling all things in heaven and on earth to you through your blood, shed on the cross.

Jesus Christ, we thank you that we can lift our heads above the contradictory voices of this world and find truth in you. We thank you that we can lift our heads above the chaos and senseless division and violence and see meaning and light in you. We thank you, Lord, that you are You - the great "I am" - ever present, never letting us go, always listening to our cry for justice, help and mercy.

We declare that you are worthy to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honour and glory and praise! The kingdoms of this world will become the Kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ and he will reign for ever and ever. And so, Lord, because of your great holiness and compassion, because of your great love and sacrifice on behalf of all your creation, you are indeed worthy to rule in your Kingdom.

Although we are not worthy, by your grace you have called us into your Kingdom and to be agents of your Kingdom, and so we commit ourselves to you in worship, adoration and service as we say the prayer that you taught us... **Our Father...**



Readings

Exodus 16:2-15 - The Israelites complain and are given manna to eat.

Philippians 1:21-30 - Paul considers it a privilege to suffer for Christ's sake.

Matthew 20:1-16 - The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner hiring workers for his vineyard...

Reflection by Simon - The master serving alongside us...

I once attended a painting competition in which some children had worked very hard and others had evidently not worked hard at all. The judge, in his wisdom, wanting to encourage all the children, announced that all the entries were as good as each other and all deserved a prize (when it was quite obvious that this was not the case!!). The faces of the children who had worked very hard on their pictures was a sight to see. In that moment the judge had rendered all their efforts worthless and meaningless!

That incident echoes the parable that Jesus told about the tenants in the vineyard, where those who had worked hard in the heat of the sun received exactly the same reward as those who came later. It is a story about what is fair and it is interesting that all our readings this week are about people complaining things are not fair. In our Exodus reading the Israelites, having experienced God's amazing salvation, then complain that they have nothing to eat (and when God provides manna that doesn't really satisfy them). In Philippians, Paul is responding to a group of young Christians who, with the best of intentions, are indignant at Paul's suffering. Similarly, Jesus told this parable in response to Peter's complaint that following Christ demanded a huge price.

But let's step back for a moment and realise that the parable, at its heart, teaches us that there IS such a thing as justice. We need that encouragement in this crazy world today! Jesus, like us, is creating a framework through his story to make sense of the chaos and complexity of human relationships. It is a framework that speaks of a Kingdom, a place of moral order, with a master who provides meaningful work for his labours and generous reward at the end of the day. Human justice, no matter how good will always be imperfect. Thousands of innocents suffer injustice at the hands of corrupt systems, while many evil people, oppressors and dictators like Stalin or Mao, die peacefully in their beds, untouched by the hand of justice. If there is no God then there is no hope of ultimate justice beyond the imperfections of this life which becomes a huge lottery. It is only really God who gives us hope of justice. And it is the notion of judgement that, like the children in the painting competition, gives meaning to all our efforts to live our lives to the best of our ability.

But, as the parable shows, God's idea of justice might be different. If God, alone, underpins the whole idea of justice, then justice belongs to him; it is "his baby"! So in the parable we see the master asserting his right to dispense justice as he sees fit. He owns the vineyard and the money and he pays the wages. We can only make sense of justice in relationship to God.

The parable reminds us that when we leave God out of the equation there is a tendency to compare ourselves to other people, to what they have and what they get. There is also a tendency to try to make everything equal for everybody when life is much more complex. People are not all the same and do not start from the same place or have the same needs.

Yet, paradoxically, the parable shows us that God does treat us all the same in one crucial aspect. We are all in need of grace and we all fall short and fail, whatever our starting point. The workers who began the day early felt they deserved more wages because everyone should be paid at the same rate. We all deserve the wages of sin which is a flat rate payment of death no matter how many good hours we put in (or bad). But God "does not treat us as our sins deserve" and he pays out the lump sum of eternal life to everyone who turns up to his vineyard, irrespective of how late they come and how deserving they are. This grace is the true basis of our equality because it reminds us we all come to God on the same basis - there is no moral hierarchy (And as a consequence, no social, racial nor political hierarchy neither)

In practice, this principle of grace might work out in many different ways. On one hand, an immigrant arriving on our shores, having contributed nothing and bringing very little. Do they deserve to receive anything? Surely they do from a country supposedly founded on the principles of the gospel of grace!! On the other hand, what of those lucky individuals and nations that have

an abundance of material, social and economic wealth? Do they deserve it? Should they feel guilty? I sometimes wonder whether God looks at us, agonising over our privileges, and asks “why are you so ungrateful?” I know that gratitude is more likely to lead to generosity than guilt.

While the principle of grace is the basis of our equality, the outworking of grace is not equal because, in the particular experiences of life, we are all different and unique. Therefore we all receive and can dispense different aspects of grace according to our circumstance, “the hour we turn up to work in the vineyard”. My wife works as a mathematics tutor in schools and she gives help to the children who are struggling not to the children who are doing well. So in the kingdom, those who receive more have more to give and those who have less to give must receive more. And so we help the weak and we give special consideration to those who are more oppressed. We are generous to the poor and make allowances for the disadvantaged.

But there is one thing still nagging. Often in the parables there is a character who never appears. In the parable of the Prodigal son (which has strong echoes of this parable with its older son complaining about the too-generous treatment of his profligate younger brother) the character who never appears is another older brother, who would not have stayed on the farm grumbling, but would have left and done everything he could to seek his wayward younger brother and bring him home. This hidden character is Jesus himself, our big brother who “came to seek the lost”.

In our parable, the unseen character is the worker who turns up earlier than all the other workers, works longer and takes his wages without complaining. He even offers a part of his wages to the workers who turned up late and are probably most in need. Because he realises that maybe they have bigger families to feed and bigger bills and debts to pay. This is Jesus. I wonder as he told the parable, how he saw himself in the story. As the master? No, probably as this worker.

Because, as I said earlier, we can only work out justice in our relationship to God. So much of our justice is about what we deserve and what we should GET and what we should be paid by life. Responding to Peter’s complaint that the cost of following is so high, Jesus is reminding us, in the Kingdom of God, justice is not about what we can get but what we can GIVE. To act justly is to act generously.

Jesus hearers might have complained, as we often do to God, that his sense of justice seems to be all wrong. But if anyone had a right to talk about justice it was Jesus, telling us this parable in the shadow of his own impending death on the cross, where he gave his all for the world. Not just talking the talk but walking the walk. He is the master working alongside us. The King of the mercy seat kneeling to serve.

We complain to God about who is getting or not getting whatever, then this God in Christ gives his all for us and calls us to go into his vineyard and act accordingly. As Paul reminded the Philippians, to live makes no sense unless we live like and through this same Christ, and that even to give everything (even unto death) is only to our advantage and gain. Yes, we all deserve wages at end of the day. The wages of sin are death but God’s giving, is for us, a life of service and of generosity - eternal life, through Christ our Lord.

Hymn

Great God, your love has called us here as we, by love, for love were made.
Your living likeness still we bear, though marred, dishonored, disobeyed.
We come, with all our heart and mind your call to hear, your love to find.

Great God, in Christ you call our name and then receive us as your own,
Not through some merit, right or claim, but by your gracious love alone.
We strain to glimpse your mercy seat and find you kneeling at our feet.

Prayers of Intercession

So help us Lord, to labour in your vineyard as grateful servants, walking in step with you to bring justice to those in particular need.

Help us to combat greed with generosity, fear with trust and division with unity. May we tackle the great issues of our time with understanding, compassion, respect and ears that listen. Lift us above tribalism of race, nation and party to welcome the good in one another and to seek the truth that bears a human face in Christ. Help us realise and live out the generous pattern you have given your people in your own self-giving of the cross.

Help, Lord, our leaders in both church and state who struggle, daily with overwhelming problems of the pandemic, of the challenge of climate change, overpopulation and food shortages, of violence, division and lawlessness. We pray for those seeking to tackle fires in the USA and Brazil, the famines in East Africa and the conflicts of the Middle East. We thank you for new steps to peace in that region. We pray for those who are fleeing persecution, war and hunger to find a better life, particularly those who have lost their place of refuge on Lesbos.

We pray that your Church will be given new imagination and creativity to proclaim the Good News of Jesus both in word and deeds of compassion. So we pray for those in real need during these times, the sick, the bereaved, the isolated, those anxious about job security and the necessary means to support their families. We pray for all who feel wounded, weary, and broken that God will have mercy, bring healing and peace. We hold in your care all who are on our minds in particular ... *(name special names here...)*.

We pray that as we struggle towards a new way of living through these difficult times, that the Holy Spirit will stir a hunger in our nation for your justice that meets every need with generous love in the way that only Jesus can. Help us ask not what we can get but what we can give as we work in the vineyard of our master, the Servant King, who works alongside us and gives His all.

Hymn R&S 522

From heaven you came helpless babe, entered our world Your Glory veiled;
Not to be served but to serve and give Your life that we might live.

*Refrain: This is our God, the Servant King - He calls us now to follow Him,
To bring our lives as a daily offering of worship to the Servant King.*

There in the garden of tears, my heavy load He chose to bear
His heart with sorrow was torn; yet 'Not my will but Yours', He said... *(Refrain)*

Come, see His hands and His feet - The scars that speak of sacrifice
Hands that flung stars into space to cruel nails surrendered... *(Refrain)*

So let us learn how to serve and in our lives enthrone Him
Each other's needs to prefer, for it is Christ we're serving... *(Refrain)*

Blessing

Generous grace, from the Father
Surpassing grace, through the Son
Overflowing grace, by the Spirit
Bless you and
Be yours to have,
Be yours to hold,
Be yours to share