



Opening Prayer for Ordinary Time

God of adventure and growth,
open our hearts, ready our minds
and fire our imaginations,
so that as we gather together before you,
and ponder the life-giving stories of Jesus,
we might discover more of your goodness,
and be swept up by the Holy Spirit
as she nurtures, disturbs and inspires us
on our journey into fullness of life. **Amen**

'Starter for Ten' Discussion Question

Think of a time when something happened which you felt was unfair or unjust. Why was this, and how was the situation resolved?

Prayers of Thanks and Praise – Psalm 145:1 – 8

I will extol you, my God and King,
and bless your name for ever and ever.

Every day I will bless you,
and praise your name for ever and ever.

Great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised;
his greatness is unsearchable.

One generation shall laud your works to another,
and shall declare your mighty acts.

On the glorious splendour of your majesty,
and on your wondrous works, I will meditate.

The might of your awesome deeds shall be proclaimed,
and I will declare your greatness.

They shall celebrate the fame of your abundant goodness,
and shall sing aloud of your righteousness.

The Lord is gracious and merciful,
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit;
as it was in the beginning, is now, and shall be forever.

Amen

Prayers of Renewal

You're invited to bring your prayers for yourself and the world before God, asking for God's renewal of those things in your life and within the life of the world in need of grace and transformation, either aloud or in the silence of your heart.

Reading Matthew 20:1 – 16

Sermon

There are umpteen occasions from my childhood where I remember indignantly telling my parents that something they had said or done was not fair. Experiments show that children as young as six-month-olds have a sense of fairness, illustrated by studying their reactions to the behaviour of various naughty puppets! In adulthood, we might find ourselves being on the receiving end of cries of 'That's not fair!', even as our own senses of fairness will have since been shaped by the culture surrounding us. At the heart of today's parable is fairness or, as the workers who put in the longest hours may say, unfairness! Some of the stories told by Jesus to illustrate what the Kingdom life he came to bring looks like are inspiring, though challenging. Others are offensive, or even perhaps subversive; they touch on our sense of fairness and bring into question common assumptions about how things should work. The Parable of the Vineyard Owner clearly falls into the latter category, and one of the few times I have had strongly angry responses to a sermon was when I last preached on this text, so hold onto your hats!

This parable is like the filling of a sandwich, in which the bread slices are formed by, on the one hand, Peter's dubious claim to have given up everything to follow Jesus (19:23 – 30), and the mother of James and John asking for preferential treatment for her sons (20:17 – 19), on the other hand. As such, it could be read as challenging both the assumed link between worldly wealth and divine blessing, and false hope that following Jesus would bring earthly power and status. The

emphasis at the end of the story on the last being first and first being last in the life of the Kingdom (20:16) echoes what had already been said in 19:30, and this serves to give further weight to these possible interpretations. Moreover, it has also been viewed by commentators as a challenge to the Protestant work ethic, as rebuking people who resent newer members getting involved in church life and changing things, and as calling for the necessary re-examination of a division between people perceived as 'deserving' or 'undeserving' recipients of God's grace. Hence, this parable can be interpreted in a range of ways, as we should probably expect from an allegory used by Jesus to express the inexpressible...

For me, it is the latter possibility that is most intriguing. Before Jesus and his friends left the region of Galilee and began journeying up to Jerusalem, he had responded to their question about who would be the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven by talking about God's fierce care for the most vulnerable members of the Church, whom he says are like lost sheep sought out by him, as the Shepherd (18:10 – 14). In the story, those workers who hadn't been hired when the vineyard owner ventured out in the early morning are gradually swept up and given a purpose, like the lost sheep being gradually brought into the sheepfold (20:3 – 7). Given this story is unique to Matthew's Gospel, perhaps it refers to the tax collectors and sinners Jesus spent much of his time with finding a home within that particular faith community. Whether or not that is the case, the last to be employed are depicted as being paid first, working back to those who had been there at the

start, and all are given the same amount. This upset those men who had laboured all day long in the heat, despite their getting the wages agreed upon with the vineyard owner from the start (20:8 – 13). Are you jealous because I choose to be generous, he asks (20:14 – 15), and they are sent away.

Now, bearing in mind this story is a word-picture for the Kingdom of God, and not a guide to employee relations, the generosity that may well offend our sense of fairness is not about equal wages but about divine grace. Whether we are well kitted-out for Kingdom life like the people chosen to work in the vineyard first, or instead feel more like the idle labourers left waiting around in the marketplace most of the day, God's grace and love is just the same. To put this another way, God does not do favourites, and thus cares just as much for the lost and floundering as for the together and strong. This might seem like an unremarkable claim when viewed in the abstract, but think about it for a second, and the scandalous and offensive nature of the story becomes clear. Picture the most loving person you know, someone who has nurtured and inspired you, and now think of them alongside and being no more or less worthy of God's grace as a Vladimir Putin or a Lucy Letby, and you get the idea. It is easy to argue that nobody is beyond the grace of God as a *general principle*, but this becomes far harder when faced with the *particular and abhorrent*. Christianity is offensive, precisely because it refuses to reject anyone.

Other Jewish leaders are depicted as having a go at Jesus because of the company he kept, treating as equals those who were rejected

and stigmatised because of who they were and what they had done. He offended their sense of fairness, because he did not comply with their ideas about who was and was not acceptable to God. Now, we know that repentance and change of direction is vital, for God loves us far too much to leave us wallowing in sin, like the labourers idling in the marketplace all day. Yet, as difficult and subversive, or painful and disconcerting, as it may be, the truth is that even the very worst among us can have a real relationship with God, if we are genuinely willing to change course and embrace God's love. This requires our commitment to taking responsibility for our words and actions; being a follower of Jesus is not a 'get out of jail free' card. However, in the Parable of the Vineyard Owner, it is clear that grace is there whether or not we feel that another person deserves as much of it as we do, if any at all. Indeed, God is *not* fair, but God *is* generous, as Jonah's experience of God forgiving the repentant enemies of Israel, despite his being furious about it, bears out (see Jonah 4:1 – 5).

This is not an easy parable to accept, perhaps especially if we carry deep hurts because of the sins of others; yet, it is a powerful counter to the lusts for revenge and vilification, which sadly form such a part of our culture and its sense of (un)fairness. I would like to encourage you to spend time with this text in your prayers this week, and hence to reflect on the generosity of God. How has grace shaped your life, and how might it do so in the days to come? Discipleship was never going to be easy, but God loves us more than we can ever imagine, and is always with us on the journey as we grapple with what it is to

follow Jesus. May you know God's blessing and God's peace, in the week ahead and always. Amen

Recommended Resource of the Week

Katherine Jefferts Schori's 2007 book *Wing and a Prayer* expounds a variety of subjects, including this parable, yielding fascinating and still relevant insights.

Prayers of Intercession

Lord's Prayer

Blessing