

TRINITY XV 2020 (Proper 20/OT25)

Be honest with me? Have you ever been jealous or envious of anyone for whatever reason? I'm sure that even if you are perfect now (!) there will have been some point in your life when such a thing occurred, even if it was when you were a child with a less developed sense of context or needs.

Reading this parable, I thought about modern day children's parties, where the custom is for the birthday child's family to give presents to everyone, lest there are tears before bedtime! Without being too cynical, such a custom can only have been dreamt up by a firm delivering children's parties. Yet the concept does bear some fleeting resemblance to the parable of the Labourers in the Vineyard.

The parable is set centre-stage within this section of the Gospel in which Jesus teaches about the values of the Kingdom life – a way of life we are called to. Much of this teaching will seem difficult and hard to us because it calls us to approach life in a way that is pretty much at odds with prevailing values and expectations. It even touches on key areas of family and personal life, yet at its heart draws us to know that God's grace is displayed in an outpouring of love for each of us. The knowledge of this is made known through the prompting of the Holy Spirit within our lives, calling us to allow God's grace into every situation. Is this an impossible task?

Look at the parable of Jonah – a person who runs away from God's call. There is the vivid scene when the sailors on the storm-tossed waves throw him overboard because they fear he is bringing them bad luck. God then rescues him through the mouth of a mighty fish and ultimately Jonah performs prophetic the task he has run away from – calling the people of Nineveh to turn from evil - only to be astounded when they do! His response? A great sulk! He just can't get over the fact that they have heeded his words, and that God does indeed forgive them. Jonah's words? 'O Lord! Didn't I say this when I was still in my own country? That is why I ran away to Tarshish at the beginning; for I **knew** that you are a gracious, merciful God, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing.' He can't get over the display of God's graciousness to the people of Nineveh. He's **so** angry he asks God to end his life. Talk about a fit of pique!

In fact, the story of Jonah was written to challenge preconceptions about the way in which God views the world. As a book it is always read in synagogues on the afternoon of the Day of Atonement – Yom Kippur. This seems to me to be a strong reminder to the Household of Israel (who first followed and then formed a covenant relationship with God) that, in fact, God does not restrict the gifts of forgiveness, grace or the knowledge of divine love. Indeed, when they hear it on the most solemn of their festivals, Jewish people are called to identify with the people of Nineveh and explore the sense that our insight into God's grace tends to be always constrained by human understanding. We try to shoehorn God into the image we desire.

This is surely what Jesus is also trying to convey in the Parable of the Labourers in the Vineyard. Let's challenge the name. Perhaps the better title might be, 'The Merciful or

Generous Landowner.’ On the face of it, the workers who had toiled the longest seem to have a perfectly legitimate gripe in moaning that those who were hired later didn’t deserve the same payment. I’m sure that Len McCluskey would have agreed with them! We, too, when we read or hear this parable will think at first in much the same way, but all is not as it seems when we start to explore it.

We could approach the interpretation in different ways. Could those in the second group be people who have had to deal with problems at home before they were able to offer labour. Perhaps those at noon could be labourers who had worked elsewhere in the morning trying to scratch a living before re-entering the work queue. People employed right at the end of the day could be the elderly and infirm who struggled all day to get there.

Cyril of Alexandria gives us a thoughtful progression of faith represented in those hired: The first – people from the time of Adam and Enoch, the second – Noah and Shem and their generation, the third- those at the time of Abraham.....and so on. I think it is a nice reinterpretation of what Jesus is trying to teach us but is not really the fullest lesson we can take away.

It is the landowner who reveals the grace of God. What we are called to know is that God desires to be as generous as possible with the gift of salvation – of drawing people into the Kingdom Life – and that whether people ‘work’ at practicing their faith for a long period or for a short while, God’s infinite grace is not something weighed out on scales. Think of the Parable of the Prodigal Son. The father doesn’t wait to hear what the returning misfit says – he rushes towards him in great love.

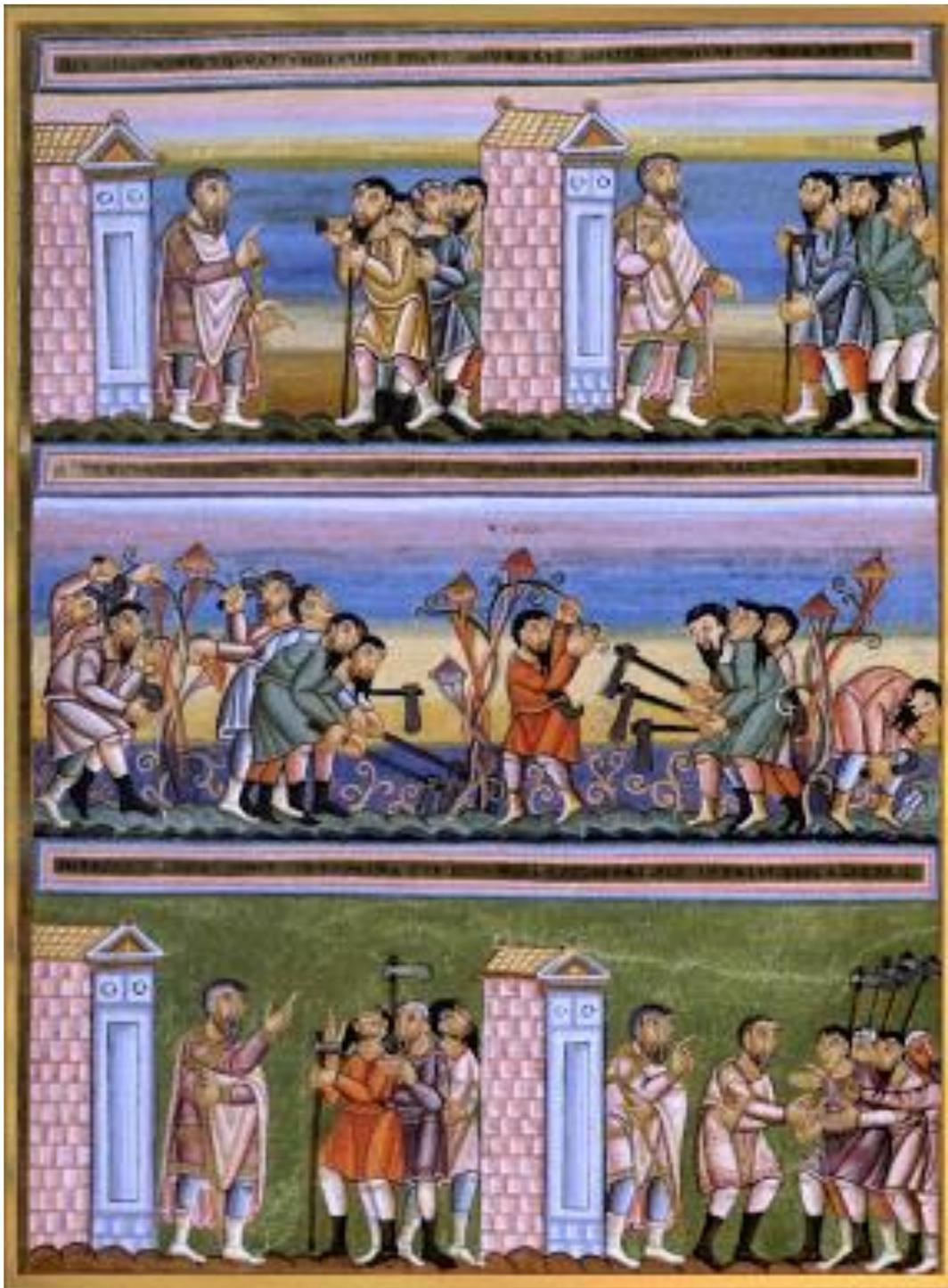
I use Charles Wesley’s hymn, ‘O Love divine, how sweet thou art’ as a prayer. I love it - and not just because the tune is called ‘Cornwall! I love it because of the way Wesley captures the endless grace of God together with our call to respond by opening our lives to this knowledge and journey in faith:

O Love divine, how sweet thou art
When shall I find my longing heart all
taken up by thee?

God only knows the love of God;
Oh, that it now were shed abroad
In this poor stony heart;
For love I sigh, for love I pine;
This only portion, Lord, be mine,
Be mine this better part.

This is what Jesus is saying in the parable. We are called to focus on allowing God’s grace to continually work within, not worrying if other people are worthy or not, so that we may overflow the gift of grace recklessly into the world like the landowner. As Paul tells us, we do this through faith in Jesus Christ - ultimately God’s doing. He graciously grants us the privilege of believing in Christ to bring this lifelong journey about.

This treasure is open to all, and it doesn’t matter what hour you arrive – God welcomes you with open arms in goodness and mercy and desires you to extend this grace to all you meet.



Codex Aureus Epternacensis, circa 1035-1040; Germany

Jonah 3: 10-4: end

When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it. But this was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry. He prayed to the Lord and said, 'O Lord! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing. And now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.' And the Lord said, 'Is it right for you to be angry?' Then Jonah went out of the city and sat down east of the city, and made a booth for himself there. He sat under it in the shade, waiting to see what would become of the city. The Lord God appointed a bush, and made it come up over Jonah, to give shade over his head, to save him from his discomfort; so Jonah was very happy about the bush. But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the bush, so that it withered. When the sun rose, God prepared a sultry east wind, and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint and asked that he might die. He said, 'It is better for me to die than to live.' But God said to Jonah, 'Is it right for you to be angry about the

bush?' And he said, 'Yes, angry enough to die.' Then the Lord said, 'You are concerned about the bush, for which you did not labour and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night. And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?'

Philippians 1: 21-end

For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain. If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labour for me; and I do not know which I prefer. I am hard pressed between the two: my desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better; but to remain in the flesh is more necessary for you. Since I am convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with all of you for your progress and joy in faith, so that I may share abundantly in your boasting in Christ Jesus when I come to you again.

Only, live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that, whether I come and see you or am absent and hear about you, I will know that you are standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel, and are in no way intimidated by your opponents. For them this is evidence of their destruction, but of your salvation. And this is God's doing. For he has graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well— since you are having the same struggle that you saw I had and now hear that I still have.

Matthew 20: 1-16

Jesus said, 'The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire labourers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the labourers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. When he went out about nine o'clock, he saw others standing idle in the market-place; and he said to them, "You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right." So they went. When he went out again about noon and about three o'clock, he did the same. And about five o'clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, "Why are you standing here idle all day?" They said to him, "Because no one has hired us." He said to them, "You also go into the vineyard." When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, "Call the labourers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first." When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, saying, "These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat." But he replied to one of them, "Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?" So the last will be first, and the first will be last.'