

*Matthew 20:1-28**Labourers in the Vineyard James & John-best seats*

While we've taken many people to airports to catch Ryanair's no-frills flights to the UK, neither Barbara or I have flown with them. Many people are delighted to benefit from the lower costs, but we've heard family and friends complaining about the airline's failure to honour the on-line 'priority booking' system (for which they had paid an extra charge). Despite this they claimed they still found themselves queuing and fighting for specific seats with those who had only paid the standard rate.

I was reminded of this when, in our reading from Matthew, those who were grumbling at the vineyard, seem to have thought they, too, deserved preferential treatment - in this case because they had worked longer hours. Surely, they felt, those who had worked longest were entitled to be paid more.

In the vineyard parable, God, of course, is the owner and believers are the workers. And we find the owner going out several times during the day to find workers from amongst those looking for work. As a result of this hiring procedure, by the end of the day some workers had done a full day while others had only worked a few hours.

But, at the end of the day all the labourers were paid a normal day's wage. No weekly pay packets or monthly cheques, the Torah (the Jewish Law) demanded that '[You shall not keep for yourself the wages of a labourer until the morning](#)', which recognised that the labourers were so poor that they needed their money each day just to survive.

Some Trade Union leaders today could be apoplectic at the fact that all the vineyard workers received the same full daily rate no matter how many hours they had worked. But no-one had been underpaid. Those who had worked longest had been fairly paid, and the owner had simply been generous to all the others.

And, of course, this is what this parable is all about; God's grace and generosity; how he gives abundantly to all of us. If we received from him what we deserved, not many of us could expect to get much at all; but God is generous in giving himself and his love to us. Our relationship with him is about this generosity on his part, not about our rights or rewards.

The reading from Matthew goes on to record the request by the mother of James and John that they be given the best seats in the kingdom. She knelt before Jesus and asked him for a favour. Doesn't this sometimes happen within our churches and in our own lives? We welcome Jesus into our hearts as Lord, yet try to play religious games, expecting something in return for our allegiance? If God grants our request, we'll work harder for him. But true worship involves praising Jesus for who he is and for what he has done - without any attempt at bargaining!

The other disciples were, as you would expect, annoyed at the mother's request on behalf of her sons, so Jesus explains, '[whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many](#)' and again '[to sit at my right hand or my left is not mine to grant- it is for those for whom it has been prepared by my Father](#)'.

If, when we come to believe that Jesus is truly the Son of God, the first temptation is to think that our worldly status or wealth will give us an advantage, the second is to think that by giving up all the trappings of wealth, power, and influence, we will automatically receive the keys to God's Kingdom.

Both the vineyard parable and the request from the mother of James and John remind us that neither those who feel superior to others, by virtue of what they feel they have done with their lives, nor those who have committed themselves to Jesus and feel they have abandoned this life's pleasures or perks for him, have any automatic entitlement to preferential treatment.

But it also gives assurance to new believers about God's gracious love for them. Jesus died and rose for us all. We are all loved, new believers are not at the back of any queue because they committed themselves later in life than others.

Jesus saw his mission as being to serve others, even to the point of giving his life for them, and he reminds us that whoever would be first should be last- should serve others.. Servant leaders recognise the worth and needs of others and, instead of using people, serve them. They are focussed on others needs, not on their own rights.

There's a lesson here for us all. We live as part of a society that's always demanding its rights, or rewards for services rendered. Whilst we need a fair and just society, rights alone are not enough. Without grace, generosity, and forgiveness, life becomes simply the survival of the fittest. Given what each of us knows about the life of Jesus and God's presence in our lives, do we really think he will favour **us** over the despised, the ignored, or sinners -who learn about him, and turn to him for forgiveness, - sometimes very late in life?

God loves and cares for us all equally. There is no point in our trying either to buy his love, or to earn it by self-denial or good works. Let's not worry about where we sit in heaven, but praise the Lord for what he's already done and is doing for us. And, with Christ alongside us, let's enjoy our journey of faith .