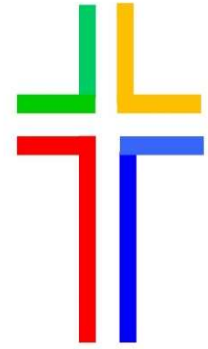


Week St Mary Methodist Church – Sunday 20 September



PRAYER

Loving God, at this moment it is good to remind ourselves that we are in Your presence; help us to remember that we can only draw close to You, because You have first drawn close to us. As the master went out in search of workers, so You take the first step, seeking us out, calling us to be Your people. So, yes, we have come to meet with

You; but You are already here, Your arms open in welcome, ready to speak to us; ready to hear us. Welcoming, seeking God, Accept the worship we offer. In Jesus' name we pray. **Amen.** The Lord's Prayer.

READING FOR TODAY Matthew 20:1-16 (NIV-UK)

'For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard. He agreed to pay them a denarius for the day and sent them into his vineyard.

'About nine in the morning he went out and saw others standing in the market-place doing nothing. He told them, "You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right." So they went.

'He went out again about noon and about three in the afternoon and did the same thing. ⁶About five in the afternoon he went out and found still others standing around. He asked them, "Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?"

"Because no one has hired us," they answered.

'He said to them, "You also go and work in my vineyard."

'When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, "Call the workers and pay

them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and going on to the first."

'The workers who were hired about five in the afternoon came and each received a denarius. So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius. When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner.

"These who were hired last worked only one hour," they said, "and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day."

'But he answered one of them, "I am not being unfair to you, friend. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius? Take your pay and go. I want to give the one who was hired last the same as I gave you. Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?"

'So the last will be first, and the first will be last.'

REFLECTION

"It's not fair," is a powerful exclamation, first heard in toddlers but continued into adulthood. It is usually driven by a sense of personal injustice, that someone else has something that we don't. It's the depth of this feeling that makes Jesus's parable of the workers in the vineyard both counter-intuitive and jarring. It challenges basic human instincts.

Life certainly felt unfair to those who toiled all day in the scorching sun but who got the same rate of pay as those who came in and worked for just the last half-hour. And they made their feelings known.

What was Jesus getting at when he told this parable? It certainly wasn't that justice doesn't matter. In the Bible we are told it does. The old testament prophet Micah (Micah 6:8) says, "And what does the Lord require of you: to act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God." At harvest festival we sing in a hymn, "For the healing of the nations, Lord, we pray with one accord, for a just and equal sharing

of the things that earth affords." A topical prayer at a time of widening inequality globally, nationally and locally.

The key to understanding this parable is the recognition that it's about the kingdom of heaven, not rates of pay and work conditions. It's set in the context of the long-running dialogue between the Pharisees and Jesus. The Pharisees, the ultra-traditional Jews who thought heaven was only for Jews who meticulously observed their intricate religious rules and regulations. And Jesus who showed God's love as being equally available to all: to Gentiles as well as Jews, to poor as well as rich, to sinners as well as the ritually clean. Little wonder the Pharisees felt so threatened by Jesus. He was upending their entire world view or, perhaps we should say, heaven view.

The remarkable thing in this story is the vineyard owner's (God's) generosity – not his unfairness. He promised the same reward to every worker. The point is that many who expect to be made much of will be in for a rude shock in God's kingdom. God will honour some very unexpected people. The thief on the cross (Luke 23:39-43), whose life of service was limited to a moment of repentance and confession of faith in Christ, received the same reward of eternal life as the apostle Paul.

PRAYER FOR OTHERS

We think of those who worked all day in the vineyard. We pray for those who have to work long hours; for those who feel under great pressure through their work. Help them to find the opportunity to rest.

We think of those who only worked for half the day. We pray for those who are not satisfied in their work; for those who are doing a job they hate; for those who feel trapped in the job that they are doing. Show them how to offer their work to You and help them to see that You are the one who makes life rich and satisfying.

Now we remember those who worked for an hour; and we think of those who never got to the field and missed their chance of work. We pray for those who have no work; for those whose place of work has closed; for those who have lost their job; for those who see no chance of getting a job, especially for the young. Help them to realise that they matter to You just as much, whether they have work or not. Show us how we can help them to see how precious they are in Your eyes. Generous God, hear our prayers. Amen.

HYMN H&P 753, StF 608

1 To thee, O Lord, our hearts we raise
in hymns of adoration,
to thee bring sacrifice of praise
with shouts of exultation:
bright robes of gold the fields adorn,
the hills with joy are ringing,
the valleys stand so thick with corn
that even they are singing.

2 And now, on this our festal day,
thy bounteous hand confessing,
upon thine altar, Lord, we lay
the first-fruits of thy blessing:
by thee the hungry souls are fed
with gifts of grace supernal;
thou who dost give us earthly bread,
give us the bread eternal.

3 We bear the burden of the day,
and often toil seems dreary;
but labour ends with sunset ray,
and rest comes for the weary:
may we, the angel-reaping o'er,
stand at the last accepted,
Christ's golden sheaves for evermore
to garners bright elected.

4 O blessed is that land of God,
where saints abide for ever;
where golden fields spread far and broad,
where flows the crystal river:
the strains of all its holy throng
with ours today are blending;
thrice blessed is that harvest-song
which never hath an ending.

BLESSING

Lord, You call us to live as Your people, behaving in a way that is worthy of the good news of Jesus. Show us how to live in such a way that Your loving kindness may be seen in us. May the Blessing of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, be upon us and remain with us always. Amen.