

## The vine grower

**Exodus 16:11-20**

**Matthew 20: 1-16**

On first reading Jesus' parable about the vine grower and his vineyard doesn't immediately ring a bell with us, for in this country, there is no long-standing tradition of growing vine commercially. We are told climate change may rapidly alter this but we are not there just yet. But in 1<sup>st</sup> century Palestine and in other European countries with a different climate even now, people would find it much easier to relate to the story. The greatest ambition of my brother in Hungary, - who retired from the ministry a few years ago, - was to plant vine all around his garden. He is now the proud producer of some 15 different varieties of grapes! Similarly, one of my cousins, who spent his life in Geo-physics, couldn't wait to save enough money to buy an actual vineyard, which he's been tending now for years. When I talk to them about this, I get the feeling that their attachment to their vines is more than just a hobby. It represents to them an almost mythical connection with the land, with nature, it gives them the pleasure of a labour of love and lots of joy and celebration when the harvest comes. And so it was with historical Israel, except that tending a vineyard was always hard work, not merely a hobby, and the mythical connection for them was a very specific connection with their God.

If we wanted to find some kind of modern equivalent to Jesus' parable, the closest we may get, is the TV reality show Undercover Boss. In this the owner, or high ranking executive goes to work in their company in disguise and afterwards give out generous gifts of promotion, practical help of money or training opportunities according to their assessment of the workforce. Nobody could be offended by these stories. In fact, we find them rather heart-warming. It's good to know that at least some well-to-do industrialists are willing to share some of their huge profits in this way. The expression on the faces of those in receipt of the surprise gifts, is what makes this show such a success.

But Jesus' parable would have offended his audience, and it still offends our own sensibilities. It does sound unfair to pay equal wages to labourers, who put in different amount of work. In the telling of the story, Jesus anticipates the offence and gives voice to it through the complaints of the longest serving labourers. A few hours before they were delighted to be given the opportunity to work at all for the accepted daily wage. But now that the immediate threat of unemployment is over, and they see what happened to the late comers, they are ready to complain.

How very human, very ancient yet very enduring reaction this is! We are never quite content with what we've got, are we? In our OT reading we have heard a similar story-line: after the amazing liberation of the Hebrew slaves from the Egyptian oppression it does not take too long for them to start complaining. They have now got the freedom they craved, so they are beginning to measure and compare and grumble. And one of the sad news I picked up in the media as our lockdown restrictions started to ease was, just how badly some of the people behaved when the restaurants first opened. The staff reported that the amount of complaints and abuse they had received was unprecedented. Instead of being pleased to be able to eat out at all, the guests compared everything to pre-pandemic times and nothing was right for them in the new situation.

So, both our bible readings and our own experience raises the question of how to be content with what God provides. How to be content without measuring and comparing, without fear and anxiety over being left behind or disadvantaged? Our inclination is always to look at others and see how they are doing. We may feel it's unfair if they get away with things we so diligently avoid doing. So what does Jesus advise?

Well, perhaps before we get to the spiritual meaning of Jesus' parable too quickly, it would be worth paying attention to the literary level of his story. Whether we are well-versed in the practicalities of vine growing or not, we are certainly familiar with the concept of unemployment, which is, after all, the context of the narrative. Using it as the background to his parable, Jesus shows a keen awareness of this particular hardship affecting a great proportion of his fellow countrymen. Sadly it is also an increasing feature of our own country, at the moment, following the economic crisis caused by the pandemic. It may not be our personal problem, but it may affect

members of our family, our friends or neighbour and we cannot be unfeeling about it, just as Jesus wasn't, hence he makes his landowner pay even the latest arrivals the daily or living wage.

In the history of Biblical interpretation however, this aspect of the parable has been sidelined in favour of the allegorical understanding, in which the landowner stands for God and the vineyard for God's people, and the story is about who gets to heaven and on what terms. It is also assumed that it is told against the Pharisees. But if we do not dismiss the practical implications, could it be that the landowner doesn't just stand for God, but is also a model for the rich and those who have in their power to provide jobs and a living wage to those who need it? Jesus' landowner goes to the market-place several times a day to seek out the unemployed, to engage them in work and pays them equal wages so that their families may not go hungry. Just think, how does that compare with current industrial employment practices, where unemployment is a tool, which keeps the workforce on their toes and gives an excuse for the management to pay the least possible wage to the employed.

What would our world look like if this parable were to be a model for how we live together in society? It's difficult to imagine. In this country, perhaps more than anywhere else we treasure the notion of 'fair play'. Can we envisage a time and a place, where generosity ruled rather than fairness? Where need was more important than justice.? Well, Jesus did, he devoted his whole life and even his death to this vision, which he called God's reign, or the Kingdom of God. And yes, he told this parable with its subversive outcome to illustrate a world governed by the heart of God. But it's not just 'the world' or the Pharisees this parable aims at. It is us too, the church, the people of God. I find it significant that this parable follows the disciples' enquiry about their own position in the coming kingdom of God. Perhaps it is also an answer to the internal rivalries of Matthew's early Christian community. Peter says to Jesus "*We have left everything to follow you. How shall we fare?*", there is the unspoken implication 'we deserve better than the rich man who is unwilling to part with his wealth to follow you'. Don't we sometimes feel like this? We have served our Lord for so long, we have done, and perhaps are still doing all 'the heavy lifting', should not we be given special consideration?

But this parable is not first and foremost about the labourers in the vineyard, it is about the vine grower, the owner of the vineyard. The vine grower, who tirelessly seeks out those who need him, who may not be fair, who may not be a good capitalist, or even a follower of the Protestant work-ethic, but who is so generous, that no-one is disadvantaged in his vineyard, in fact, most of his workers are over-paid.

And as all of Jesus' parables, this one too calls for a response. Are we offended by the blatant injustice of the story and hope that our future will be earned and deserved by our 'hard work in the blazing sun'? Or, are we content with the knowledge that 'our landlord' knows all our needs and whatever we are able to achieve in the vineyard is not a hardship, but a privilege, a gift, 'the joyous fulfilment of our created purpose', as one commentator puts it. If so, may we share the Apostle Paul's experience as he heard the reassurance from God: "*My grace is all you need.*

**Amen**

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