

St John's Sunday Service for 20 September

Good morning everyone. Wherever you may be, you are welcome to join in worship with the people of St John's Church, Kingston Park.

Psalm 145:1-9

- 1 I will extol you, my God and King,
and bless your name forever and ever.
- 2 Every day I will bless you,
and praise your name forever and ever.
- 3 Great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised;
his greatness is unsearchable.
- 4 One generation shall laud your works to another,
and shall declare your mighty acts.
- 5 On the glorious splendour of your majesty,
and on your wondrous works, I will meditate.
- 6 The might of your awesome deeds shall be proclaimed,
and I will declare your greatness.
- 7 They shall celebrate the fame of your abundant goodness,
and shall sing aloud of your righteousness.
- 8 The Lord is gracious and merciful,
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.
- 9 The Lord is good to all, and his compassion is over all that he has made.

And now, picking up on some of the words from this psalm we have the song Great is the Lord and most worthy of praise.

Song

Great is the Lord and most worthy of praise,
The city of our God, the holy place,
The joy of the whole earth.
Great is the Lord in whom we have the victory,
He aids us against the enemy,
We bow down on our knees.

*And Lord, we want to lift your name on high,
And Lord, we want to thank you,
For the works you've done in our lives;
And Lord, we trust in your unfailing love,
For you alone are God eternal,
Throughout earth and heaven above.*

SoF 145 Steve McEwan © 1985 Body Songs

Prayer: Lord God you are great and mighty and worthy of all our praise. Thank you for all you have done and continue to do in our lives and for all the ways we recognise your power and might through the awesome sights and sounds of your creation. Thank you for your extravagant and unfailing love demonstrated most powerfully through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Lord you taught us that everyone is our neighbour, to be loved and valued as much as ourselves. We are sorry for the times when we have failed in thought, word and action to show such love to others, and for the times when, in our pride and arrogance, we have forgotten our absolute dependency on you in all things. Lord we thank you for the huge price you were prepared to pay so that our sins can be forgiven and we claim that forgiveness now. By your Holy Spirit, guide us into a new and more generous way of life that is committed to drawing all into your kingdom of justice and peace. Accept our praise, eternal God, as we trust in your unfailing love and grace. Amen

Reading: Matthew 20:1-16

“For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire labourers for his vineyard. **2** After agreeing with the labourers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. **3** When he went out about nine o'clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; **4** and he said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.' So they went. **5** When he went out again about noon and about three o'clock, he did the same. **6** 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?' **7** They said to him, 'Because no one has hired us.' He said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard.' **8** 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.' **9** When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. **10** Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. **11** And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, **12** 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.' **13** 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? **14** Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. **15** Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?' **16** So the last will be first, and the first will be last."

Talk:

I've been reminiscing a little recently and thinking back to the time when I was a student at Newcastle University, some 40 years ago. The rock band Genesis was due to appear at the City Hall and tickets were to be released in two days' time. A number of us decided to join the queue which was already forming in the street. By the second day the queue stretched far past where we could see and what had begun with a party atmosphere was now turning into a test of endurance as we were all cold and tired and wondering if it was worth it. Imagine what would have happened if, when the ticket office opened, those just wandering up were served first, followed by those way back at the end of the queue!

From the last verse of today's reading it sounds as though that describes the Kingdom of God, 'So the last will be first and the first will be last.' Surely Jesus can't really mean it like that! But he seems quite emphatic, in fact the end of chapter 19 says the same, 'But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first'. What's it all about? This doesn't sound like a kingdom of justice and joy, nor the perfect situation we long for when we pray 'your kingdom come'. Do we really want to see God's kingdom come if it means that things will be so unfair and unpredictable?

If we think back to the harvest season in first century Palestine, we can perhaps discover a deeper truth in this situation. Grapes were harvested towards end of September and it was always a race against time, to gather all the grapes before the rains came. Landowners would take all the help they could get, even if someone could only work the odd hour here and there. The owner of this vineyard very early one morning, before the working day had begun, made his way to the town square where all the day labourers would have gathered. (Day labourers were those who did not have regular work, they did not own property and were dependent every morning on someone giving them employment in order that they could feed their families). 'Work for me for 12 hours and I will pay you a day's wage', he said to the first group and sent them off to his vineyard.

What about those who were left in the market place? There is no mention of them complaining. We don't hear them protesting against the injustice which left them standing in the market place while others were given a day's work. Anyway, three hours later, the owner of the vineyard went back to the town square and found a number of day labourers still standing around – he selected another group of workers and offered to pay them an appropriate amount at the end of the day. He returned twice more and each time chose more labourers, promising to pay them an appropriate amount for working the rest of the day. At five o'clock he returned again and found to his amazement, a group of men still waiting, hoping against hope that somebody would hire them. His first reaction was what we might expect, 'Why are you standing here idle all day?' hinting perhaps that they are unemployed because they are lazy - but in answer to his question they remind him that they have no choice in the matter - they are dependent on someone offering them work, and so he sent them off to his vineyard to work for what was left of the day.

When evening came, those employed last were perhaps surprised to be paid first and amazed to be given a whole day's wage – their family would eat that day after all. Those given work at

different times of the day must have been equally surprised to be given more than they dared hope for on a day that had started out so uncertainly. Finally, those favoured few who were given work at the beginning of the day were given their wage as promised. They were furious and protested, 'We have worked all day long – some of these people have only worked an hour and you've paid them exactly the same. It's just not fair!' At this point that the owner of the vineyard gives us a clue as to what is going on. 'I've done nothing unjust. You and I agreed at 6 o'clock this morning that I would pay you a day's wage and I have kept my end of the bargain. Am I not free to do what I want with what is mine, or do you begrudge my generosity?' I think, if we're honest, many of us would sympathise with those labourers who had worked all day in the heat.

We have a wonderful picture of God's compassion and love in the owner of the vineyard who gives each man employment and a day's wage - anything less would have left a worried wife and hungry children - he gave each what they needed.

Fairness, or unfairness is such a subjective idea – we don't often hear people complaining that they have more than their fair share of something, it's only when the unfairness goes against them that they become indignant. Here in the West we consume far more than our fair share of the world's basic resources of energy, water and food, before we even begin to list the luxuries most of us regularly enjoy, and yet not many of us complain about that.

God's perspective, God's standard of fairness, which is at the heart of today's Gospel, is often very different from ours. I wonder, why are we so offended by God's ridiculous generosity? We are all happy enough to benefit from it. Perhaps it's because we simply can't grasp the fact that there is enough for everyone – enough love, enough peace, enough joy – God invites every single one of us into his Kingdom – we don't have to queue, or jostle for the best places, or fight for our rights – our seats are reserved, and Jesus himself will escort each one of us, no matter in what order we arrive. In John's gospel Jesus assures us, 'In my Father's house there are many dwelling places ... I go to prepare a place for you, and I will come again and will take you to myself' (John 14:2-3).

We need to take hold of that promise so we can just relax, stop fighting for our rights and concentrate on making sure others will benefit from God's generosity too.

Importantly, we find in today's story, that God does not only love and care for those we think he ought to. Jesus so often tries to show us something of the inclusive, all embracing nature of God's love, and here the vineyard owner sees the needs of all the men in the market place just as God sees all people with their needs and is concerned to provide for them all. There are many people out there in our market place who have not yet had the opportunity to work in God's vineyard, not necessarily through any fault of their own – who are waiting restlessly for the truth – waiting anxiously for their needs to be met.

Imagine something you would really like ... it might be the house of your dreams with someone to do all your cooking and cleaning ... or maybe that holiday you have been longing for... perhaps the restored health of someone you love. Whatever it is, imagine that you and the person sitting nearest to you have each been given it, and now you have the bill. You are being charged ten pence, but the person nearby has to pay just one penny. How do you feel? Are you outraged because you have to pay nine pence more? I very much doubt it. I think you are too amazed at what is essentially an incredible free gift. The difference in the cost is neither here nor there – the payment in both cases is negligible compared with what is on offer. There is nothing to be gained by comparing the amount we pay, the amount of effort and time we put in to serving God, with that of others because both will be absolutely negligible compared with the reward God promises each of us. At the end of Chapter 19 Jesus spells it out quite clearly, 'everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields, for my name's sake, will receive a hundredfold, and will inherit eternal life.' All that we can offer pales into insignificance compared with what God is offering. We simply offer all we have – all we can, with a willing heart.

Today's parable emphasises how God's reign turns everything upside down. A life that is truly 'worthy of the gospel of Christ' will indeed turn the world's standards upside down with first and last being exchanged or at least equal. The key question is whether we can free ourselves enough from our preconceptions of fairness to accept that just as God loves us unconditionally, so he loves the latecomer and the prisoner and the suicide bomber.

Where does all this leave us? Do we genuinely believe in equality? Do we really want everyone to have the status, privileges, and options that we have? That is something we need to think about and there are a couple of things to bear in mind. Firstly, there are many still standing waiting in the market place – still waiting restlessly for the truth – and it's our duty not just to enjoy our positions of privilege, but to reach out to them and give them the opportunity to work in the vineyard of God's kingdom. Secondly, no matter how hard we try, there is nothing we can do that would be sufficient to earn all that God gives us. We must never count ourselves more deserving than anyone else, but simply be thankful for God's amazing grace.

Prayers:

Let us come with openness to express our concerns for the Church and the world, to the God of compassion and gracious understanding.

Loving Father, thank you for your extravagant grace that gives what we don't deserve simply because you love us. Whenever we start to get offended by your generosity or open-mindedness, give us the grace to repent and join your rejoicing. Guard the Church against self-righteousness and all rules and limits which you would not own, and keep always before us the rule of love. Not our will, **but your will, Lord, be done.**

Lord Jesus Christ, we pray for the wider world where so many are hungry, fearful, and suffering at the hands of others. We ask that those in positions of power and influence might be guided by your Spirit as they make decisions that affect the wellbeing of those around them. Help us not to become indifferent to the plight of the brothers and sisters we cannot see, but to reach out in love, speaking out against injustice and being generous in sharing our resources. Not our will, **but your will, Lord, be done.**

Loving Father, we pray for all who are vulnerable and unable to cope with the demands of life particularly at this time of increased stress and uncertainty. We pray for those struggling with anxiety and depression, asking that you would give us understanding and compassion, that we might respond in helpful ways and also that by your Holy Spirit you would bring your healing and peace. Not our will, **but your will, Lord, be done.**

Lord Jesus Christ, we pray for all those who are unwell in any way, suffering the pain of bereavement, or simply weary with the way things are. (pause) Help us all, as the effects of coronavirus continue to wreak havoc with businesses, finances, and with physical and mental wellbeing. By your Holy Spirit, bring healing, and comfort and renewed hope in your eternal plan and purpose for each one of us. Not our will, **but your will, Lord, be done.**

We thank you Lord God that you are gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and we lift these prayers to you, trusting in the powerful name of Jesus. **Amen** Through the words of this song we offer all we can to the one who gave everything for us.

Song:

I will sing of the Lamb, of the price that was paid for me,
Purchased by God, giving all he could give!
Here now I stand in the garments of righteousness;
Death has no hold, for in Jesus I live.

I will sing of his blood that flows for my wretchedness,

Wounds that are bared, that I may be healed;
Power and compassion, the marks of his ministry;
May they be mine as I harvest his field.

*Oh, I will sing of the Lamb. Oh, I will sing of the Lamb.
my heart fills with wonder, my mouth fills with praise!
Hallelujah, hallelujah.*

Once I was blind, yet believed I saw everything,
Proud in my ways, yet a fool in my part;
Lost and alone in the company of multitudes,
Life in my body, yet death in my heart.

*Oh, I will sing of the Lamb. Oh, I will sing of the Lamb.
Oh, why should the King save a sinner like me?
Hallelujah, hallelujah.*

What shall I give to the man who gave everything,
Humbling himself before all he had made?
Dare I withhold my own life from his sovereignty?
I shall give all for the sake of his name!

*Oh, I will sing of the Lamb. Oh, I will sing of the Lamb.
I'll sing of his love for the rest of my days!
Hallelujah, hallelujah. Hallelujah, hallelujah.*

SoF 856 Stuart Townend © 1997 Thankyou Music

Blessing:

The last will be first, and the first will be last.

God help us not to feel threatened by that truth, nor to see it as unjust. Help us, rather to remember the extravagance of your generosity that gives what we don't deserve, that offers a gift beyond price, purchased for us by the blood of Jesus - eternal life in your kingdom of love, and peace and truth.

And now may the Lord bless you and keep you, the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; may the Lord look on you and all people with kindness and give you his peace.
Amen