

Hi. Welcome to St Ninian's Church in Stonehouse. My name is Stewart and I get to be the minister here.

As always I'd encourage you to say hi in the comments if your watching on YouTube or Facebook and to visit our st-ninians-stonehouse.org.uk to find out all about what we do and how you can get involved. In particular a reminder that the Book Group meets tonight, that's the 20th of September at 7:30pm to discuss the House on the Strand bu Daphne du Maurier and on Thursday 24th join us to Dig Deeper into today's passage at 7:30pm.

Today marks 6 months since our church building was closed by the lockdown. Over the past few weeks the Kirk Session has been considering whether to re-open or not. We decided we would go ahead with the required risk assessment and put in place all the measures needed to open and had initially planned a test for today.

The risk assessment was completed and the team recommended that now was not the right time to reopen, especially given the current local lockdown in Lanarkshire. It now looks like further restrictions might be in place soon with covid cases rising sharply.

The kirk session met again on Friday evening and confirmed that decision not to reopen for worship on Sundays yet.

So, we will continue our worship online, on the phone in printed copies or on CD.

Today we look at one of those stories Jesus told that makes us feel a bit uncomfortable... and with good reason.

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. After agreeing with the labourers for the usual daily wage,[a] 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.'

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Sermon

The opposite of poverty is justice. We heard Bryan Stevenson say that last week when he talked about his work with prisoners. And this week we are presented with a parable to illustrate the point.

The labour market hasn't changed that much over time. The people who are deemed to be best suited for the job are taken first and others are left behind. It's the economic version of lining up against a wall and picking teams. People would go to the village square each morning and the landowners would come each day and hire the workers they needed... and every day some would be left behind.

If you're the owner of a vineyard then when you want the best workers. You want the people with experience people with strong backs who are hard workers, people who can work all day in the sun. After all, you're paying them so you want to maximise your profit.

But there was no welfare state. If you didn't get work you didn't get paid.

The people who didn't get work were often those who had been injured or weren't the strongest or youngest anymore, or people who had the reputation of being lazy or trouble. The people who didn't get work were often the people who needed it the most.

So along comes the owner of the vineyard and picks the best workers who agree to work for the usual daily rate.

But a few hours later the owner goes back to the square. There are people still there. The other land owners would have been and taken some of the better workers but the owner of the vineyard takes some more workers.

He comes back later at noon and there are still people there, hoping for some work. And he takes them on. And again he comes back at three and people are still there. Another day... sitting... waiting... hoping against all hope that there might be a job that needs done, even for just a few hours.

And again the owner of the vineyard comes back at 5pm. To be honest 3pm was stretching it. I mean who on earth is going to still be sitting waiting for work at 5pm? The desperate? Those who are ashamed to go home to explain to their family that yet again they didn't get any work today?

Can you imagine sitting there all day? Watching the employers coming and picking up workers... but never you. Sitting there because there is nowhere else to go and nothing

else to do. Sitting there, hoping and praying that just once someone will come along and ask you do do some work for them. Surely you would just give up. You wouldn't wait all day. Would you?

But today is their day. They are chosen and off they go to work for an hour at the end of the day.

At the end of the day the manager starts to pay the workers, with the ones hired at the end being paid first. And they get a day's wage. And so do the workers hired at 3pm and noon and 9am. And the workers who have been there all day are raging. That's not fair! We worked all day in the heat of the sun.

It's not fair.

Except they agreed to work for the wage offered so what's their problem? What more do they want? They got a fair day's wage...

So, here's what we do with a story like this... It's a parable, so obviously it's not really about the thing it's about. It must be about something else, something to do with God, something spiritual. Of course. Yes, that's it... It's about grace. That underserved mercy where we receive something we haven't earned. A gift. There are people who have been busy working in the church for years and along come these new people who discover Jesus and everyone gets the same reward.

And it is about grace.

But if that's all it's about then we really haven't been paying any attention at all to Matthew's story about Jesus. Because grace isn't some spiritual thing. Grace is a real world thing. All of it is. Matthew has absolutely no interest in some spiritual nirvana after we die. The Jews don't even believe in heaven. You die and on the day of resurrection the righteous are raised to new life. Why would Matthew be talking about some place in the clouds? Everything Jesus says in Matthew's gospel is about here and now, not there and then.

Jesus has just been teaching about arguments and divorce and ego and justice. These are real world issues. These are things that affect all of us all the time. And it seems as though from the very beginning Jesus has been particularly interested in the place of those that society doesn't value. The poor, the naked, the prisoner, the widow, the bereaved, the outcast, women, children. And at the same time Matthew tells us that Jesus has come to perfect the law, not to do away with it.

That all means that everything we need to make this right already exists. The rules are there. The instructions for living are in place. We just don't understand them or follow through on them. Sound familiar? This isn't a new problem. It's a very human problem.

The rules of economics, like all the other rules for living are set out pretty clearly in the Bible. Here's basically how it was supposed to work.

There were 12 tribes. One of the tribes, the Levites, would be the priests, so they didn't get much land. They would be busy with worship and the law and stuff.

The other 11 tribes had the land split among them and they would give a proportion of their produce to the Levites. All good so far.

Here's the clever bit. There was a system in place to make sure that someone couldn't come along and buy up all the land. Every 75 years the land went back to its original owner, or at least the tribe, so that no one tribe would be able to dominate. It was called the year of jubilee. The reset button was pressed and everyone started over. But guess what... loopholes were found and as the population grew people started to own more land and it was never returned, even in the year of jubilee.

So people who should have had land had no land of their own. They had to work on someone else's land to get money to buy food instead of being able to grow their own food on their own land. And pretty soon there were people who were getting more and more wealthy and others who were getting poorer and poorer.

Here's a real world example from today. Jeff Bezos, the guy who owns Amazon, has made so much money over the last 6 months that he could give every single Amazon employee worldwide a \$105,000 bonus and have the same amount of money that he had 6 months ago. But he won't.

Did you notice that when the government realised that thousands of people were going to find themselves on Universal Credit they put the rate up because people then couldn't live on that tiny amount.

Matthew's gospel is political and it is economic. Just before this parable Jesus tells a rich young ruler who has kept all the commandments to go and sell all that he has and give his possessions to the poor. And the man is sad because he has many possessions.

That's an easy story for us. None of us are billionaires.

So Jesus does what Jesus does... he makes it about us. We become the workers in a vineyard who think we are owed more than someone else. Or we are the people who never get picked. The ones left sitting at the side of the road every day wondering how on earth we will make ends meet.

The opposite of poverty is justice. And justice, according to Jesus in this parable, looks like people being paid the same daily rate, even if they haven't done the same amount of work. Why? Because the land is God's land, and everyone has an equal share. And to God you aren't an economic unit. You are a person, loved and cherished.

People wonder why Jesus says the poor will always be with us... it's because we just won't give up what we have for justice because we have swallowed a great big lie about how the world is supposed to work... and it is literally killing us, both physically and spiritually.

This story about the workers in the vineyard is about God's gifts, but not just of spiritual things like grace and forgiveness, important and amazing as those gifts are. But it is also a parable about justice, how we live, what we value, especially how we value people.

The first will be last and the last will be first. Perhaps it's time we started thinking in new ways about what's important and what part we might play in making a more just world.

Prayers for Others and Ourselves

Holy One,
why do you love us?

We are a tiny part
of this amazing universe
you have created.

And yet your word tells us
you saw we were very good.

We are weak and selfish,
we are easily led astray
and give in to temptation
more often than we should.

And yet your Son tells us
we are forgiven and loved.

You revealed your love
in creation, in word and flesh
how can we fail to believe it?

Why do we fail so often
to live a life that reflects
your love?

We know we are loved
and yet we too often
choose to respond
to situations in hate.

We know we are forgiven
and yet we too often
choose not to forgive
others for their wrong doing.

We are made in your image
but we are not you,
we are prone to
make mistakes
and choose wrong
over right.

Help us, Lord,
to see our faults and failings
to desire to be better
to be more like Jesus
and to follow in his way.

Here us as we join together in your words, saying:

Our Father in heaven
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come
your will be done
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Save us from the time of trial
and deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power
and the glory are yours,
now and for ever.
Amen.

Sending

God's unlimited love and grace be with us
as we close our time of worship.
Let us commit ourselves
to taking this love and grace
out into the world in which we live and move.

The Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ
the love of God
and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit
be with us all,
this day and always.