



ST. STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

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Septuagesima

Being the Third Sunday Before Lent, February 16th, 2014

**✠ In The Name of The Father and of The Son
and of The Holy Ghost. Amen. ✠**

One of the drawbacks to the manner in which the Scriptures are presented during the liturgy is that the passages are of necessity read out of context. Yet context can be very helpful in understanding them. Such is the case with today's reading from St. Mathew's Gospel: The Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard.

Its message runs quite contrary to all human concepts of fairness. The notion that Johnny-come-latelies get exactly the same reward in heaven as lifelong Christians certainly didn't appeal to the apostles, folks who had been with Jesus from the very beginning of his ministry any more than it appeals to us. But the context in which Jesus told the story of the Laborers in the Vineyard makes it easier to understand, if not any more appealing.

A young, rather bumptious, member of the Judean elite wanted to discover if Jesus had the educational qualifications to be the Messiah. So he approached him with a deceptively subtle question: "What must I do to have eternal life?"

Christians today should have no doubts as to the answer. But things were not quite so straightforward in First Century Judea. The simple answer – the one given to the man in the street or the Jews in the Pews was: "If you scrupulously obey the Law of Moses, God will accept you as a righteous person." This was fine in theory, but intellectuals, like the young man, knew that scrupulously obeying all 613 Laws found in the Torah was quite impossible in practice. Hence the question.

"You'll have eternal life if you keep the commandments," replied Jesus – a most unsatisfying answer. "Which ones?" the young man countered. Jesus reeled off a list from which the four commandments governing our human duty to our Creator were conspicuously absent. But, then, rabbinical scholars well understood that God regarded the commandment to love him as fulfilled in loving one's neighbor.

"You shall not commit murder," replied Jesus, "You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not bear false witness. Honor your father and your mother. And you shall love your neighbor as yourself."

The young man, however, was looking for something a bit more challenging than a rehash of long-established rabbinical doctrine. "I've done all that stuff ever since I was child," he said, off handedly, "What else do I need to do?"

It was just a throw away line prompted by his desperation to engage Jesus in an intellectual debate, but the line gave Jesus an opening to end it before it began. "Oh, I see," he said, "So you want to be perfect? In that case, sell everything that you own, give it to the poor and you'll have treasure in heaven. Then come and follow me."

St. Matthew – a former tax collector for whom credit ratings were a way of life – records that the young man went away very sad, because he was extremely well off. As he left, Jesus remarked to his disciples: "Truly, it will be hard for a rich man

to get into the kingdom of Heaven. In fact it would be easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.”

Matthew says the disciples were flabbergasted. “Who then will be saved if the rich can’t make it?” they asked. This is not such a stupid question. Christians often cherish the notion that there is something especially blessed about being poor. Not so. Jesus’ words were: “Blessed are the poor in spirit.” Humility and poverty are by no means the same thing.

The disciples did not believe all rich people would be saved, but that being rich gave you rather better chance of achieving salvation than the ordinary Joe. The Law of Moses to be the sole path to salvation and rich people had better resources for keeping the Law to the letter, than the working stiff who was constantly obliged to make compromises just in order to survive,

“With men [salvation] is impossible,” replied Jesus, “But with God all things are possible.” And he went on to tell them the Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard.

The boss of the vineyard, he said, went out first thing in the morning and hired a crew of laborers. And he went out again at 10.00 AM, 11 AM, Noon, and 2.30 PM in the afternoon to hire more men. Finally, an hour before it was time to stop work for the day, he went out and hired yet another work crew.

At the end of the day, the workers lined up for the pay and the folks who been hired last were given the same amount of pay as the folks who’d sweated all the way through the heat of the day.

Hardly surprisingly, the people who had worked longest and hardest started to grumble about it. By any reasonable human standards, the vineyard's pay policy is exceedingly unfair – especially as laboring in a vineyard is notoriously hard work. But, then, an aspect of God, revealed in this parable, is that he doesn't play by union rules, especially when it comes to the matter of salvation.

The boss of the vineyard tells the folks who have worked longest and hardest to bug off. They don't have a say when it comes to devising the

vineyard’s pay policy. It's his money and he can do what he likes with it.

The divine pay policy certainly didn’t appeal to the apostles – disciples who had been with him from the very beginning of his ministry. This isn’t the way humans would do things. And it most certainly isn’t the way the Harvard Business School, the Wharton School – or any other business school – would teach their students to run a business.

But, in the Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard, Jesus is telling us God really doesn't give a hang what we think. The Kingdom of Heaven is not a democracy and we don’t have a vote in this or any other matter. But most important of all, Jesus is explaining to us, in remarkably gentle fashion, how very different God is from the way we picture him.

It is a message God has given us from the very beginning of his revelation. "My thoughts are not your thoughts," he told the prophet Isaiah, "Neither are my ways your ways." Despite this people still make the mistake of imagining that his thoughts and ways are somehow the sum of our highest human aspirations.

Once upon a time, for example, people believed he exacted the most painful of all punishments to expiate the sins we commit against him. Thus they concluded that he demanded the sacrifice of our first-born children. The patriarch Abraham was raised among people who practiced human sacrifice, which is why he didn't argue when God instructed him to build an altar and sacrifice his son Isaac.

Jesus’ message in the Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard is be thankful God is so different from us. Be thankful he isn't fair by human standards. If he were fair, we would all be in desperate trouble because his standards are so very much higher than ours. So let us be thankful that God’s forgiveness is always there free for the asking. All we need to do is tell him we are sorry for what we’ve done – and then try to do better. *AMEN.*

To the Only Wise God, Our Saviour, be Glory and Majesty, Dominion and Power, Both Now and Forever. AMEN.