

0Lectio Divina – 25th Sunday of the Year A

Matthew's Gospel (in brief)

- Composed between 80-90 CE
- Author is anonymous, but named as 'Matthew the tax collector' by later tradition.
- Written in scholarly 'synagogue' Greek.
- Incorporates almost the entire Gospel of Mark, plus material from Q and material unique to Matthew.
- Structured around 5 major discourses (each ends with the phrase: "When Jesus had finished...."):
 1. Prologue – chapters 1- 4 Genealogy, Nativity & Infancy
 2. 1st: 5-7 Sermon on the Mount
 3. 2nd: 10 Missionary Discourse
 4. 3rd: 13 Parable Discourse
 5. 4th: 18 Community Discourse
 6. 5th: 23-25 Apocalyptic Judgement Discourses
- May be a parallel for the 5 books of the Pentateuch - Jesus the new Moses.
- Jesus first words are 'to fulfil all righteousness'.
- A handbook for Church leaders to assist them in teaching and preaching, worship, mission and polemic.
- 2 broad categories: discourse & narrative.
- The only Gospel to explicitly mention the 'Church' – Matthew is theologian of the church.
- Initially addressed to a Jewish-Christian audience – only late in the Gospel is there openness to Gentiles.
- Names Jesus as 'Messiah' at the very beginning and throughout the Gospel.

Matthew 20:1-16 - things to notice

- This Sunday's Gospel is from a new, but related, section of Matthew. Not now *specifically* related to the Church as the Kingdom on Earth, this section takes up issues about values and spirituality in the reign of God, this section nevertheless has implications for both individual and communal living of the reign of God.
- This parable is found only in Matthew.
- 'The Kingdom of heaven is like...' – a frequent expression. Again, Matthew is not talking about the Kingdom as a reality yet to come, but as the reign of God already at work in the world.
- As usual, the parable works with common, ordinary experiences of the ancient world where workers waited in the marketplace to be hired.
- Note that the landowner invites workers to the vineyard at 6am, 9am, noon, 3pm & 5pm.
- Landowner makes a specific agreement with the first workers (one denarius – the usual daily wage needed to feed & clothe a family). It sounds like he hired ALL the workers who were there at the time.
- With the later workers, the landowner agrees to pay them, 'a fair wage'.
- If you were the landowner going out at daybreak what sort of workers would you look for first?
- What kind of workers are left by noon, 3pm and 5pm?
- Note: 'idle' is an unfortunate translation of the Greek *agroi* which means literally, 'without work'.
- The reckoning: the last comers are paid first and the early birds last – when have we heard that sort of thing before (the first will be last and the last first – classic reversal theme of the Gospels. In the Kingdom of God everything is turned on its head).
- Last comers get paid a full day's wage – they must have gone off home happy. Perhaps they were weak, old, sick or disabled. This may have been the first time they were hired in a long time. Perhaps they were healthy workers who had already finished working for someone else. Regardless of their physical condition they received everything they needed to live on (to sustain life).
- Early birds get paid last and expect more. They are victims of 'rising expectations' because they have seen how much the last comers got paid. But they, too, receive everything they needed to live on (to sustain life).

- They complain – this is unjust! We deserve more because we worked more!
- Note: no one receives his due, or what he thought he was due – neither early bird nor late comer.
- Note: for the late comers the ‘wage’ has become a ‘gift’.
- In giving both early birds and late comers the same ‘wage’ the landowner has made them equals – all are equal beneficiaries of God’s graciousness invitation to the Kingdom.
- The landowner responds that he is not unjust and has honoured their agreement.
- “Don’t be envious because I am generous” – There is a place for everyone in the Kingdom (including those disregarded by the world – poor, sick, old, disabled, etc). Life in the Kingdom is not a reward for long hours of work, but comes from responding to God’s invitation (choice) to belong (enter the vineyard) whether you are an early bird or a late comer.
- What the early birds and the late comers share is being chosen by God and being given everything they need regardless of their condition. The Kingdom is gift – it cannot be earned, but is had by responding to God’s choice of us, no matter what condition we are in – fit or disabled, black or white, male or female, virtuous or sinner, Jew or Greek, etc. Each worker works as best they can and has different abilities.
- God’s kind of thinking and acting is often very different to human thinking and acting. What the landowner does in the parable is hardly a good business model. He’d go broke paying a full day’s wage and getting only an hour’s work!
- The parable can also be interpreted as a practical expression of how to love our neighbour – with generosity and compassion, without considering if they deserve our kindness or not – for the disciple of Jesus must think and act like God.
- But this parable fits right into the biblical idea of justice which is heavily biased in favour of the ‘have nots’ – the widows, orphans, poor, blind, lame, sinners, etc. No one is left out of the gaze of God’s care.
- Thus, the last will be first and the first last! Note: no one is excluded, just a change in the order of things which challenges how things should be in human thinking.

Liturgical Setting for this Sunday

The First Reading is from the Prophet Isaiah: Seek the Lord *while he is still to be found, while he is still near (don’t delay)*, abandon wickedness, turn back to the Lord who is rich in forgiving because his ways are not your ways, his ways are high above your ways – God does not think, judge or act like (most) human beings.

Reflection

For many, the parable which Jesus tells in the Gospel today seems profoundly unjust. Why should those who have done little work get the same pay as those who worked all day?

Maybe the answer lies in the first reading for today: My ways are not your ways; my thoughts not your thoughts. So often in the scriptures, God seems to have a totally different way of approaching things to most of us.

The parable presents God as a landowner going out at five different times during the day to hire workers for his vineyard.

With the 6am workers he makes an agreement for one denarius for the day’s work - the usual daily wage for a labourer. The workers who come later are promised a ‘fair wage’. But when payment time comes, they get a full day’s pay even though some have worked only one hour!

Usually, the youngest and fittest would be hired first and older and weaker workers left till last. But God doesn’t seem too worried about what condition the workers are in or what time of day it is. The last comers must have been delighted to have received their unexpected full day’s pay. For them, it was really a gift rather than a wage for time worked. The ‘early birds’ fell victim to ‘rising expectations’, thinking that they would get more.

In giving both early birds and late comers the same ‘wage’ the landowner has made them equals – all are equal beneficiaries of God’s gracious invitation to the Kingdom. And there is a place for

everyone in that Kingdom, including those often left behind in the world – the poor, sick, old, disabled, etc.

Life in the Kingdom is not a reward for long hours of work. It is a gift – it cannot be earned, but is had by responding to God's choice of us, no matter what condition we are in, whether we are an early bird or a late comer.

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The parable can also be interpreted as a practical expression of how to love our neighbour – with generosity and compassion, without considering if they deserve our kindness or not – for the disciple of Jesus must think and act like God.

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God's outrageous and extravagant graciousness and generosity is so different to the often petty and exacting way in which we treat each other. God's sense of fairness and justice is so much broader and richer than ours. That is what life in the Kingdom of God is supposed to be.

Like last Sunday, it is our awareness of God's extraordinary kindness, patience and mercy which help us to act in the same way - to see with God's eyes, to feel with God's heart and to act with God's intention.