

The Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost
Diocesan Sermon - Sunday, 20th September 2026

The Rev. Dr Jane Lee -Barker - Priest in Charge Anglican Church of Barham

Matthew 20:1-16:

Today's Gospel passage is a parable. We know Jesus taught in parables to give people a chance to interpret the content for themselves according to their own life experience. Each person can have a slightly different interpretation.

In today's parable the owner of a vineyard hired men at the beginning of the day. They worked as they were meant to do and at the end of the day they were paid a just wage for the day's work. It would have been a good thing if the parable had stopped there but it didn't. No, Jesus continued to relate the fortunes of several others who came much later for work. Those who came last received the same wage as those who came early and worked throughout the day.

We can notice a number of things here. The last and the first has again entered the parable. Jesus has often adverted to this formula, and it serves as a reminder that those who come early or who are there from the beginning, are asked to be faithful for a long time without superiority over those who come later. Perhaps we can say that they were lucky to have been chosen early and had the privilege of serving early. It may be that some of those who are considered first and are leaders in God's work may eventually be revealed as last at the last judgement. The choice is not ours.

Secondly this parable is Jesus' way of responding to Peter's question in an earlier part of this Gospel. (19:28-29). Peter essentially wants to know what they will get for leaving everything to follow him. Disciples in general want to know that what we do, we do for God's sake and there is an intrinsic reward in itself for the work. We serve with privilege. Yet the perils in the work arise because of it and can reflect our proud self-consciousness.

Yet this parable teaches us about the amazing grace that lifts the last to be first, the little or insignificant people who become more than they might have imagined. The last become first in this story not because they have done good work but because of the goodness of the Lord. In the parable, these are people who had no work, but the owner had given them an abundant opportunity. It was a gift of grace. In the same way, as disciples, we all rely on God's grace. The gift of Christ enables all of us to be faithful to God. All is grace, all is blessing.

This parable is, then, a reminder to Lay or Ordained people not to see our Christian life as worthy of reward. Rather it is a privilege to be able to work in the Lord's vineyard at all. All of our work is not an occasion for feeling better than someone else or indeed for looking down on those who appear to be a latecomer to the Kingdom. In the first century some of the Pharisees looked down on the people who were newcomers. Some other Jewish Christians looked down on Gentiles who were just starting to become Christians. We can all be guilty of it. Some Roman Catholics or Orthodox can look down on "late arrival" Protestants in today's world.

Sometimes we can look down on those who are newcomers to church. We may think they have not been there for long enough. In one church I was in, someone said of a staunch Anglican and tireless worker for the church that they had only been in the town and church for eleven years. It was not enough for them.

All is grace. We are fortunate if we have been able to labour with the Lord for a long time and our true response is a heart full of gratitude.

We have an abundant Lord who loves us the point of giving us an overabundance of love.

Let us be thankful. And let us praise his Holy name!

Amen