

Reflection for 20th September 2026 (Trinity 16 – Matthew 20:1-16)

The parable of the labourers in the vineyard must have grabbed the attention of those who first heard it, because of its surprising ending, which would have helped to etch it into their memories. But think for a moment about another parable of Jesus, one the best-known ones, this time in Luke's gospel – the prodigal son, who messes up his life and comes back to his father to find himself welcomed with open arms. The eldest son, working in the field, hears the sounds of celebration and protests to his father about the injustice of the situation. The father, however, says "Son, you are always with me, and all that I have is yours." The joyful welcome for the prodigal son does not diminish the father's love for the faithful brother.

The parable of the labourers in the vineyard deals with the same issue. In Luke's gospel, the Pharisees were upset that Jesus was welcoming outcasts and sinners: but Jesus told them that God loves and forgives people just as they are – he doesn't keep a tally of the past. At the time Matthew wrote his gospel, the Gentiles were joining the Church, and some of the Jewish traditionalists were raising the same complaint: "Why should these latecomers have the same privileges as us? It's not fair!" Perhaps Matthew recorded this parable of Jesus to answer their complaints. Such complaints, from whatever source, demonstrate a failure to understand the grace of God and an over-estimate of our own worthiness of it.

None of us can afford to be sure about our suitability to be recipients of God's grace and love, and we certainly have no cause to criticise others who have come in by a different route. None of us can claim to have been faithful stewards of the gifts God has given us, or to be perfect examples in our faith and actions. The truth is that none of us deserves to enter the kingdom of God by our own merits. God's love is a gift, and it is God alone who has the right to offer it to whoever he wishes.

We are all friends of Jesus through grace. It is not for us to question God's choice of people or where he should draw the boundaries of his kingdom. As the vineyard owner in the parable says, "Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?" In a world of ruthless competition, the parable reminds us of a different kind of economy in which, as Jesus said, the first are last and the last are first.

Bob Whittle