

- *The parable of the workers in the vineyard appears to make it not worthwhile to work for a long time in the vineyard! Yet the reward in the Kingdom is eternal life, and is surely worth working for as long as we live. Reflect on this truth and see what the Lord has to say to you.*
- *Pray for the poor of the world who find it hard to gain justice in any form. Pray for people who you know and ask the Lord to show you what you can do to help.*

## Final Prayer

In peace, You fill my soul with the music of Your love; You feed my spirit with the stories of Your glory; You heal my body with the soothing balm of Your touch. Yes, Lord Jesus, You challenge me every day in myriad ways, but minister to me so that I may sustain the work You have given me to do. I pray in Your Name: AMEN

## Prayer

Listen to us, Lord Jesus, and help us listen to You. Speak to us, Lord Jesus, and help us speak to You. And then, when we really begin to talk, share with us the deeper things of the Kingdom of God, as we share our lives with You. May we always seek to enter in to a greater communion with You, our Lord and Saviour: AMEN

## Other Prayer Suggestions

### Weekly Theme: The Gifts of the Spirit

*Pray today that the various gifts of ministry and care (see Romans 12) be recognised and understood by all the church; especially hospitality, love, teaching and ministry in general.*

### On-going prayers

- *Pray for the world as it reacts to the elections in the USA*
- *Pray for the new President elect of the USA, Barak Obama*
- *Give thanks for the joy of Christian fellowship*

## Meditation

Take what is good from all my efforts, Lord God;  
And make it useful in Your Kingdom.

Take what I consider to be wonderful,  
And place it in Your awesome light.

Take what I am uncertain about,  
And illuminate with Your judgement.

Take what I consider rubbish,  
And transform this into what is useful.

Take what I have unwittingly forgotten,  
And bring it to mind my again, renewed.

Take what I do regularly all the time,  
And transform it by Your glorious presence.

Take everything, Lord; let me not be afraid;  
You are the one who makes all things new!

## Bible Study - Matthew 20:1-16

<sup>1</sup> *For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out first thing in the morning to hire labourers for his vineyard. <sup>2</sup> After agreeing with the labourers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard.*

<sup>3</sup> *When he went out later, around nine o'clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace. <sup>4</sup> He said to them, "Go into the vineyard as well, and I will pay you properly." So they went. <sup>5</sup> When he went out again at noon and also around three o'clock, and did the same. <sup>6</sup> And then about five o'clock he went and found others still standing around, and said to them, "Why have you stood around here all day?" <sup>7</sup> They replied, "Because no one has hired us." He said to them, "You go into the vineyard as well."*

<sup>8</sup> 'At the end of the day, the owner of the vineyard said to the foreman, "Call the labourers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then on to the first." <sup>9</sup> When those hired last in the day came forward, they each received a full day's pay. <sup>10</sup> And when those hired first came, they thought they would receive more; but they also received the same day's pay, <sup>11</sup> and when they received it, they grumbled at the landowner <sup>12</sup> and said, "These here only worked one hour, and you have paid them the same as those of us who have worked through the heat of the whole day." <sup>13</sup> He replied to one of them, "Friend, I am not being unfair. Did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? <sup>14</sup> Take your pay and go. I wish to give to this last worker the same as I give to you. <sup>15</sup> Do I not have the right to do whatever I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?" <sup>16</sup> So the last will be first, and the first will be last.'

## Review

Jesus told the story of the parable of the labourers in the vineyard to explain the teaching which he just given the disciples; 'many who are first will be last, and the last, first.' (19:30). Indeed, virtually the same words conclude this parable, except the two halves of the saying are the other way round 'the last will be first, and the first will be last.' This confirms our belief that the saying was central to Jesus' teaching about the Kingdom of God. The parable itself is relatively easy for us to understand, being a picture story which invites us to interpret it by means of allegory, and it describes the values of the Kingdom of God as opposite to those of the world in which we live. These values should of course be reflected in the life of Church, God's Kingdom present with us now.

**What does this parable describe?** The picture presented by the parable is partly familiar and partly unfamiliar to us. We can all imagine a landowner going out to hire labourers for casual work in a vineyard at a time of harvest, when the crop must be gathered in a short time as possible. This would explain why the landowner went out several times during the day, increasing the total work effort on the vineyard right up to the last hour of work, presumably because of a good crop! However, one thing is strange, which is that the hiring is done by the landowner (is this God?), but the payment (20:8) is done by the landowner's foreman (is this Jesus?). It would have been expected that the foreman was responsible for 'hire and fire' whereas the landowner was responsible simply for payment; but that is not the picture here; the roles may be reversed to illustrate Jesus' teaching (19:30), but may also illustrate the close dependency of Jesus and the Father.

**The hiring of the labourers** The labourers were all hired to work 'in the vineyard', and the vine was an ancient symbol for the people of Israel, (e.g. Isaiah 5). Jesus himself had already spoken of 'workers in the harvest' in God's Kingdom (Matt 9:38); so both of these give us an idea of the importance of work in the vineyard harvest for the Kingdom of God, as in this parable.

When the first labourers were hired (20:2), they were hired on the basis of a standard day's pay. Those hired first had probably gathered in the market place at harvest time with a choice of where to work, as every landlord in the region would have been doing the same thing and the market for labour was swift. These people were ready, eager and willing to put in a full day's work for good pay. Later, the landowner went to the marketplace, presumably needing to complete the short lived harvest, and proceeded to hire people on four other occasions during the day, on each occasion promising to pay the labourers 'properly' (in Greek, 'justly'). These later labourers would have expected to receive a portion of a day's pay according to how long they had worked, and would normally have been satisfied at that.

When the last labourers were hired with only an hour's work left in the day, the foreman asked 'why have you stood around here all day?' It is wrong for us to presume they were simply lazy; such a presumption is an arrogant cultural presumption on our part. We are invited to see in these labourers the cry of the genuinely poor and disadvantaged; those

who were unattractive to other landowners in the market, and who patiently wait for help. The reply 'because no-one has hired us' hid the real personal difficulty for those who faced the simple truth 'no work, no pay; no pay, no food'. This is scandalously true for poor and disadvantaged people even to this day, and any prejudice against them is unworthy of us.

**The payment of the labourers** The reason for paying the last labourers first was so that everything would be done openly. If the landlord had wished to save himself the trouble of dealing with the complaints of those who had worked longest, then he should have paid them first, so they would have been well out of the way before 'the last' received their generous pay packet!

As soon as we hear that those labourers who worked least were paid the full day's wage, our reaction is that this is over generous, but the Master is to be commended for his generosity towards those who probably needed a full day's pay more than most because of their poverty. It is only when the first workers come forward that the extent of what is going on makes us ask questions about 'fairness', and people even to this day raise their eyebrows at the thought of equal pay for all, for whatever time worked. Capitalism is so deeply embedded into most of us that we too expect that however generous the master was to those who needed a full day's pay, there should be some premium (20:12) for those who worked the full day. But this is not about capitalism, it is about the Kingdom, so is it covetousness, like that of the rich young man (19:23-30), which triggers the reaction 'this is not fair,' when legally, God is entirely just in doing what He has said?

The story makes two things clear. Firstly there is no difference in God's eyes between those who have served either a long time or a short time in the Kingdom, and this translates directly to any perceived difference today between those who have been 'saved' throughout their lives and those who have come into the Kingdom late in life. The reason I say this is because the previous passage of scripture was not just about places in the Kingdom of God, it was about 'salvation' (see Peter's question 19:25 and the explanation), and this parable therefore carries on this same theme. Secondly, this whole section of scripture has been about 'rewards' in the Kingdom of God, and the clearest possible message from this parable is that there is only one 'reward' in the Kingdom of God. This is the reward of the privilege of being in God's presence by the grace of Christ; and it is the same privilege which is equally available to all, however long they have 'worked' in the vineyard of Christ.

## Questions (for use in groups)

1. Does the parable of the workers in the vineyard make you feel easy or uncomfortable? Why?
2. Try to describe what 'justice' it is that gives the same money to people who have worked for different periods of time.
3. Discuss in your group the injustices against the poor and disadvantaged which mean they find it hard to break out of poverty, as hinted at in this text.

## Discipleship

### Personal comment:

*I do fear that the church today keeps rather too close to a more capitalist concept of the church rather than the Kingdom principles found in this scripture. Often, the reason for this is because the church has to live and work in the real world where government laws determine how things can be done; for example, in how money is handled and used. It is a hard but important task for the church to convey Kingdom principles of justice, in which all are equally valuable and equally worthy, despite the prejudices of the world.*

### Ideas for discipleship programme