



Sunday Reflection

16th Sunday after Pentecost

in the Charges of St Margarets, Renfrew
& St Johns, Johnstone



For Sunday 20 September 2020

Pentecost 16

On this 16th Sunday after Pentecost, and the fifteenth Sunday after Trinity, we come together in worship today, we are reminded that God deals with all of us with grace and with love and without favour.

Reflection for this week's Gospel

"The last will be first, and the first will be last." Matthew 20:16

An Illustration to set the scene

In the 'old-normal' days, like last year and the years before - every year there are a considerable number of tennis lovers who queue all night for seats at the Wimbledon Championships. They bring their own provisions and many set up little tents to secure their place for the precious tickets. If the weather is unfavourable, from all accounts it can be a long night.



Imagine, though, you are one of these people: the morning comes and you feel you have paid for your Centre Court ticket in more ways than one. You have put in the time and effort, made the sacrifices, and you deserve it. And then you get a shock. You

realise that the authorities are letting in people before you. People who have not queued, have had a good night's sleep, have just turned up, and they are being allowed to enter the grounds without the inconvenience of waiting. You're still going to get your ticket, of course, but that's not the point. That's not fair, you might say. You might even say something a bit stronger.

Looking at the teaching of the Gospel

I expect that's how some of the workers in the parable felt. That's not fair. What sort of employer is this? They had toiled all day in the scorching heat, but when it came to collecting their wages, they were put at the back of the queue. Worse still, when it came for them to be paid they received the same money as those who had done virtually no work.

Nowadays they might take their grievance to a trade union. Imagine the media frenzy at the injustice of it all! But there were no unions then, and no media, and the workers had to deal directly with the landowner, who revealed himself to be an equal opportunities employer with a difference. The contract of employment specified the "usual daily wage" and that's what the workers received at the end of the working day, as ordained by the book of Leviticus. If some were paid that same wage for only working part of the day, that was at the employer's discretion. Did he not have the right to be generous with his own money? Why should that generosity be limited in any way?

Jesus told this parable in direct response to Peter's complaint: "Look, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?" (Matthew 19:27). Not for the first time, Peter had missed the point. The point is that people cannot earn a place in the kingdom of heaven, but that God is gracious to all alike,

regardless of what work they have done or what contribution they have made. Sometimes, those who become Christians later in life achieve more than those who are Christians from early baptism. The last will be first. To all, though, justice will be done. Nothing will be withheld that was promised.

How can we reflect on the application to our lives?

It is easy to sympathise with those workers who were hired early in the morning. In our own lives it's easy to develop a sense of entitlement, based on how involved we've been in church life, or how generous we've been with our time, talents and money. Then people who have done nothing for God all their lives, who have perhaps wasted their lives, come along at the eleventh hour and get an equal blessing. That's not fair, we think. Nevertheless, we need to understand that we will all receive an equal blessing and in God's good time something will be made of all our lives. Entry to the kingdom is at God's invitation, although we can decline it. The hiring of all the workers through the day was done personally by the landowner, not by any intermediary. At Calvary, the criminal crucified with Jesus was not deserving of anything but of Jesus he made a simple request: "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." To which Jesus replied, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise." And so a criminal was the first to enter God's kingdom, with God's grace and with an equal blessing with all who would follow him. Because of God's grace, we should all feel like those workers hired last, and be filled with gratitude and thanksgiving that God has chosen us at all.

"The last will be first, and the first will be last." Matthew 20:16

Please share your response to this reflection to Rector@SECStJohnStMargaret.org.uk – did anything speak to you? Did you feel challenged, angered, consoled by something in the words? How did God's spirit move you as you read it? Have you shared the words with someone else? Is this a worthwhile thing to make available to folk whilst we cannot meet for corporate worship to share in word and sacrament? What are your thoughts?

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