

## How much ?

18 9 11

God our creator,  
you feed your children with the true manna,  
the living bread from heaven:  
let this earthly food sustain us through our earthly pilgrimage  
until we come to that place where hunger and thirst are no more

My text may be found in today's gospel and is Matthew chapter 20 and verse 14,  
'I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you.'

When you come across a passage in the Bible that you like and know really well, do you smile in recognition ? For me, it's just like meeting an old friend after a long time out of their company. In the case of a friend, it's great to catch up; to check out if they're still the same and to see how they've changed. It's great to be in the company again of those we know and like and love.

With a passage from scripture, the original words in Greek or Hebrew do not change though we are truly fortunate that following the ground-breaking work of William Tyndale at the turn of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the Bible in English is available to us in many different versions, not least the Authorised Version whose 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of publication we are celebrating this year. And only this month, we have a new and fresh translation by Bishop Tom Wright of the New Testament

which I recommend to you as an accurate, scholarly but accessible rendering of scripture into the language of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

So the actual words of the Bible don't change but their translation into the language we speak can. But even if we were never to read another Bible other than the King James Bible of 1611, we could still find that the meaning of the same words we read could change because we, not they, are different. We are older, hopefully wiser, and our understanding has developed as we have had more and different experience of life.

So it is that I come to Matthew's parable of 'The Labourers in the Vineyard'. Believe it or not this was the passage on which I choose to write a videoed sermon as part of a course on preaching at Oak Hill Theological College in London where I was trained for the priesthood. I can't remember the words of the sermon but to my shame, I do remember knocking my notes off the lectern and having to duck down out of view of the camera to pick them up – so embarrassing !

Well this parable about present life on earth and our future reward in heaven is fairly straightforward and reasonably easy to understand. There's a vineyard and it is the time of the grape-harvest. The landowner goes out early in the morning to hire labourers to work harvesting his abundant crop. In the marketplace, folk prepared to work stand around waiting to be hired. He hires the men he needs and they agree to do a day's work for the agreed day's wage which, as you probably remember, is a denarius, a small silver Roman coin which was the normal pay for day labour.

So far so good. But where the parable starts to get odd is the fact the landowner seems to get ants in his pants and goes out again to the market place not just once more but four further times during the day, the last being as late as 5 o' clock in the afternoon and each time the men are hired on the understanding that they will be paid 'whatever is right'.

At last the working day is over and the labours assemble to receive their pay. They are paid in reverse order and the ones who have worked for just an hour are given the same amount of money as those who worked the whole day long. Now you don't need advice from Human Resources or a Personnel Department, as it used to be known, to know that you have on your hands a real issue of inequity because in the real world of labour relations, generosity to those who worked an hour needs to be matched with proportionate generosity to those who sweated through the heat of day-long labour !

But of course we are not talking about working for a living but working to live, to live the good life, the life of the righteous person, the way of life that leads to eternal life. And here we see the surprising but reassuring truth that it does not matter how long we live the Christian life, our reward will be the same - because everyone is equal and special in the sight of God and we are all loved by him.

It may sound outrageous for the landowner to say 'I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you.' His disgruntled labourers think so ! But he is not telling them an unpalatable truth but the wonderful fact that all will be given the same reward of life eternal for serving him here and now no matter how long.

I could stop here but what speaks to me today, in a way it did not back in 1993, is the need to apply this heavenly principal to our earthly lives. There is a vast discrepancy in salaries, in the money people are paid for what they do which is based on the principle of motivation and reward – incentive to do and value for doing. We have an interesting system whereby bankers are paid huge sums for what they manage to do with and to our money. We have the spectacle of millionaire footballers like Cristiano Ronaldo in the Spanish equivalent to the premiership going on strike about what they are being paid when unemployment in Spain is among the highest in the EU. Of course, I'm not literally suggesting everyone be paid the same but the scale of rewards seems disproportionate in the light of real need. Some have money to burn; others insufficient for their basic needs. The issue and problem is a potential minefield, but it is one worth giving serious thought to.

One day, thank God, as Christians loved by God the Father through the incarnation of his son, Jesus Christ, and through the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives, we will all enjoy the same reward.

I have spoken in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,  
Amen.

*Preached at the Eucharist  
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H: Sermon 24: How much

