

Grace that is Amazing

The Prodigal Son had squandered everything.

He took his inheritance and in doing so basically cut his ties with his family and he broke his father's heart.

However, his father was a wise and gracious man and so he allowed the son his freedom to leave home and to go and discover who he really was.

The son did eventually find himself, but it was at the bottom of a pig trough, he was so hungry that he was eating pig food when he came to his senses.

He had become dehumanised. He was as low as the pigs. Now to a Jew, this was unthinkable!

He had fallen from his high privileged place to the lowest that he could reach, in fact he was down and out and he had no one to help him out.

This much loved parable can be understood on so many levels and seen through a variety of lenses. It can focus on the Prodigal Son; it can focus on the Elder Brother, and it can also focus on the Compassionate Father.

When the son arrived home, who was there to meet him? Of course, his loving father, with outstretched arms and a smile that would warm the coldest heart, and a fattened calf and ring for his finger and sandals for his feet and a robe and a speech, *"My Son was dead but now he is alive, he was lost but now he is found"*.

In this story, and in those words, we have the gospel of Jesus Christ.

In his thought-provoking book.... *"The return of the Prodigal Son"*, the Dutch theologian, Henri Nouwen suggested that the painting by Rembrandt of the Prodigal Son, is also the story of God and his relationship with the world. The Son is Christ, he has left the glory of heaven to come to the depths of this world's sin, and now he has returned home and is being received into the arms of his Father again.

Not a traditional understanding of the story... but yet a powerful interpretation.

Why am I reflecting on this parable today? Because it connects with our parable from Matthew's Gospel.

The landowner in the parable is God. He is hiring people to work the vineyard. He arrives early in the morning and he takes the first group of workers aboard. They make a contract, a fair wage for a fair day's work, a denarius, and off they go singing happy while you work... and everyone is apparently happy.

But the landowner goes back, at different intervals during the day, to hire more workers. In fact, every three hours he arrives at the First Century

Palestinian Job Centre, a.k.a. the town centre, and takes whoever is still there. In fact, right up until an hour before the work finished, he is still taking people out to the vineyard to work.

Everyone, up to this point is apparently still happy.

It is at payment time that the atmosphere changes, as the workers who have been there all day get the same wage as the ones who arrived with an hour to go.

Grumbling and griping, the workers who were employed first object to the outcome of this transaction, until the landowner says to them, *“Don't I have the right to do what I want with my money, or are you jealous because I am generous?”*

In these words we get near the heart of the parable.

It's a powerful little parable.

All the workmen were in great need of employment, without this work there would no bread on the table for their children, or roof over their heads.

They were all in desperate need of help, from the strongest to the weakest.

They were totally dependent on the landowner. He was their only provider of employment.

The landowner, who is God, was full of compassion. He saw that those who were still standing and waiting for work were in great need, and so he hired them. This is an important part of the parable.

The workers employed first became like the elder brother, in the Prodigal Son parable, who were angry with the landowner because of the way that he treated the last compared to the first! Because they had received the same wage as them.

But I would like us to think about the late comers to the vineyard, who received the blessing of a day's wage.

Why did the landowner pay them the same?

That is the crux of the parable!

Notice that the parable is sandwiched in between two great sayings... 19:30.. *“But many who are first will be last and many who are last will be first.”* And 20:16, *“So the last will be first, and the first will be last.”*

The strongest and the fittest were hired first, the ones at the front of the queue, but as this parable finishes, the first shall be last and the last first.

Is Jesus pointing to a deeper mystery here, that those in the Kingdom of God, who are considered to be the weak, and at the end of the queue, might somehow end up at the top of the queue?

Who would have been at the end of the queue?

The lame, the blind, the weak, the despised, the unfortunate....The ones with no-one to help them. The no-hopers.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German pastor who died as a martyr at the end of the Second World War for standing up for the weakest, wrote these words, *"God is not ashamed of the lowliness of human beings. God marches right in. He chooses people as his instruments and performs his wonders where one would least expect them. God is near to lowliness; he loves the lost, the neglected, the unseemly, the excluded, the weak and broken"*

There is something in these words that speak to the heart of this parable of Jesus. The plight of the latecomers, they were not lazy or late but they were trodden on and literally prevented from work by the strongest.

I believe that they weren't lazy people. They were waiting to be hired, in fact they waited right up to the last hour. They didn't give in. It wasn't their fault they weren't hired first.

They continued to wait for the landowner to return to help them find work. They put themselves in the way of his generosity.

This parable teaches us that it is important to put ourselves in the way of grace, and to apply this to our own lives. It's important to keep praying, singing and worshipping the Lord. Don't give up. Even when you are at your lowest and weakest, keep believing in the generosity of God.

Put yourself in the way of grace, for you don't know when the landowner will return. Keep your lamps filled with oil, goes another parable. Grace will come but not always immediately. God will return, but not in our timing, in His.

Secondly, don't give up hoping. What was the latecomers motivation for continuing to wait until the end of day?

It would be the faces of their children without food. It would be the tears in their eyes at the prospect of going another night without bread. This kept them hoping that their fortunes might change and the landowner might come again.

Did they keep believing that the landowner was a generous man, and maybe he would still come back to hire them and take them on? Yes!

Likewise, for us, – keep on trusting in the grace of God. He is a generous God. The more we trust Him, the more that we will keep on hoping that He will still fill us with his goodness and his grace.

Psalm 23: Yea though I walk through the dark valley you are still with me... Goodness and mercy all my life will surely follow me. We walk through dark valleys but we can continue to trust in the goodness and mercy of God.

As the sun was setting that evening, these latecomers would have gone home rejoicing and praising God. Their needs were met, their families would have food on the table and another night with a roof over their head, whilst the workers who began the day joyfully went home with their faces tripping them. They went home grumbling, and annoyed at the generosity of the landowner, and hearing again his voice echoing in their minds, *are you jealous because I am generous?*

It's a great story isn't it? But it is closely connected with the parable of the Prodigal Son and other stories that Jesus told about the extravagant nature of God, reaching out to the lost and the weak.

He is a God who gives without counting the cost. God doesn't use a calculator when he blesses us. He gives extravagantly, just look at his creation and the next time you see a golden sunset, remember the extravagant nature of God.

He is a God who delights in giving. When the wine runs out, he blesses the wedding with an abundance of new wine; when the disciples catch the fish, the nets were about to break; when Jesus feeds the 5000, there are 12 baskets left over for the disciples to take back to their villages to feed those who had nothing. The secret, is to have Christ present in our lives.

This is our God and this is the God that we are called to worship and follow. He is the one who said, *when you have done it to the least, you have done it to me.*

So, continue to put yourself in the way of His grace. Hang in there! Wait patiently for him to bless you. It might not come at the first hour or the 3rd of the 6th or the 9th but it will come and it may come at the 11th hour and suddenly His blessings are more than we can contain.

God sees your situation and he feels your pain and he knows your hurt and he will bless you, but stay in his presence and in the way of grace. If the last-hour workers employed at the vineyard had gone home an hour earlier, they would have missed out in the blessings!

Don't give up hoping or believing, whatever God has called us to do, it will eventually be a blessing to us, and when it comes receive it gratefully and be blessed.

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.