

# ST STEPHEN'S HOME SERVICE – SUNDAY 20<sup>th</sup> SEPTEMBER 2020

## INTRODUCTION



*It's not fair! It's just not fair. Perhaps this is how you have felt at times or perhaps you've heard this said by others, especially if you've got children or grandchildren. They seem to have an acute awareness of right and wrong and are not afraid to say so (often quite openly) when they see it or feel it. But we all know how it feels when we witness or experience unfairness. What about the 'postcode lottery' of certain healthcare services? Or the recent fiasco of the*

*GCSE and A level results between public and state schools? Or even the availability of Covid Testing Centres? It can easily become the focus of our attention and can eat away at us. And this is exactly what the labourers in the vineyard are struggling with in our gospel reading today, especially those that have worked the longest number of hours.*

*But Christian discipleship is not about a system of rewards for the most faithful or longest serving. It's not about deciding whether you or I deserve God's blessing or His reward. It's about recognising the overflowing generosity of our God who is ready to welcome absolutely everyone. Whether you pitch up at the crack of dawn or just before clocking out.*

*So pause for moment to reflect. Where might you be able to see something to give thanks for now you look back? Or where do you feel life hasn't been fair, that you want to bring to God now?*

## CALL TO WORSHIP

Lord, speak to us

**That we may hear your word.**

Move among us

**That we may behold your glory.**

Receive our prayers

**That we may learn to trust you.**

## **RECOGNISING GOD'S PRESENCE WITH US**

Be still, for the presence of the Lord,  
The holy One, is here;  
Come bow before him now  
With reverence and fear  
In him no sin is found  
We stand on holy ground.  
Be still, for the presence of the Lord,  
The holy One, is here.

Be still, for the glory of the Lord  
Is shining all around;  
He burns with holy fire,  
With splendour he is crowned:  
How awesome is the sight  
Our radiant king of light!  
Be still, for the glory of the Lord  
Is shining all around.

Be still, for the power of the Lord  
Is moving in this place:  
He comes to cleanse and heal,  
To minister his grace -  
No work too hard for him.  
In faith receive from him.  
Be still, for the power of the Lord  
Is moving in this place.

## **TURNING AGAIN TO GOD**

God our Father,  
we come to you in sorrow for our sins.

For turning away from you,  
and ignoring your will for our lives;  
Father, forgive us:

**save us and help us.**

For behaving just as we wish,  
without thinking of you;  
Father, forgive us:

**save us and help us.**

For failing you by what we do,  
and think and say;  
Father, forgive us:  
**save us and help us.**

For letting ourselves be drawn away from you  
by temptations in the world about us;  
Father, forgive us:  
**save us and help us.**

For living as if we were ashamed  
to belong to your Son;  
Father, forgive us:  
**save us and help us.**

May the God of love  
bring us back to himself,  
forgive us our sins,  
and assure us of his eternal love in Jesus Christ our Lord.  
**Amen.**

*Silence*

Blessed is the Lord  
**For he has heard the voice of our prayer;**  
Therefore shall our hearts dance for joy  
**And in our song will we praise our god.**

### **PRAISE IN RESPONSE TO OUR GENEROUS GOD – A PSALM**

I will extol you, my God and King,  
and bless your name forever and ever.

**Every day I will bless you,  
and praise your name forever and ever.**

Great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised;  
his greatness is unsearchable.

**One generation shall laud your works to another,  
and shall declare your mighty acts.**

On the glorious splendour of your majesty,  
and on your wondrous works, I will meditate.

**The might of your awesome deeds shall be proclaimed,  
and I will declare your greatness.**

They shall celebrate the fame of your abundant goodness,  
and shall sing aloud of your righteousness.

**The LORD is gracious and merciful,  
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.**

(Psalm 145:1-8)

**OLD TESTAMENT READING - Jonah 3:10-4:11(NRSV)**

*God has sent Jonah to give the people of the very corrupt city of Nineveh an urgent message: "Turn from your ways, or trouble is coming!" Jonah doesn't want to go, and runs away. To help change his mind, God engineers a bit of time for him in the belly of a whale. Jonah reluctantly agrees to deliver the message, and the people of Nineveh take it to heart and change their ways....*

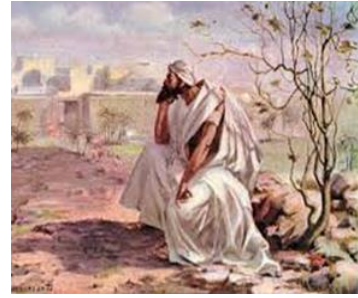
When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it.

But this was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry. He prayed to the LORD and said, "O LORD! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing. And now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live." And the LORD said, "Is it right for you to be angry?"



Then Jonah went out of the city and sat down east of the city, and made a booth for himself there. He sat under it in the shade, waiting to see what would become of the city. The LORD God appointed a bush, and made it come up over Jonah, to give shade over his head, to save him from his discomfort; so Jonah was very happy about the bush.

But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the bush, so that it withered. When the sun rose, God prepared a sultry east wind, and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint and asked that he might die. He said, "It is better for me to die than to live."



But God said to Jonah, "Is it right for you to be angry about the bush?" And he said, "Yes, angry enough to die." Then the LORD said, "You are concerned about the bush, for which you did not labour and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night. And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?"

Thanks be to God.

### **GOSPEL READING Matthew 20.1-16 (NRSV)**



Jesus said, "For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. When he went out about nine o'clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; and he said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.' So they went. When he went out again about noon and about three o'clock, he did the same. And about five o'clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, 'Why are you standing here idle all day?' They said to him, 'Because no one has hired us.' He said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard.'

When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, 'Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.' When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage.

And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, saying, 'These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.'

But he replied to one of them, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?' So the last will be first, and the first will be last."



Thanks be to God.

### **REFLECTION (by Andy Todd)**



Although it's quite a few years ago now, some of my school-day memories still have the power to bring me out in a cold sweat. One of the worst was the weekly ritual humiliation of having to line up and be selected for a sports team. If you are among the fortunate individuals who was naturally gifted at sport, you will have no idea how awful it was while, one by one, those to the left and the right of you were picked, and you were left standing there. It might have been kinder simply to be made to wear a large sign saying "Loser"!

Now imagine that you are the last person standing, and so by default have to join one or other of the groaning teams. And then, to everyone's amazement, the teacher declares that you are to have the star role of (depending on the sport) centre-forward, or goal-shooter, or opening batsman. The boot – or shoe, or trainer – would be well and truly on the other foot!

That kind of turnaround captures something of the reversal of fortunes in Jesus' parable of the landowner and the fruit-pickers. The landowner chooses to pay some 11<sup>th</sup>-hour recruits the same as the wage he had agreed with those who had worked a full day. The latter, unsurprisingly, cry foul.

Jesus' parable is not a critique of employment conditions, or of the unfairness of his or any other economic system. It's meant to help us to glimpse something rather wonderful about God.

To see what this might be, we need to press rewind to see what had prompted Jesus to tell the parable.

His disciples had been getting increasingly unsettled by Jesus' attitude to recruitment. He appeared quite happy to welcome people who, to his disciples, seemed unworthy of being part of his movement. But with others, who appeared just the sort of people they surely ought to be recruiting, Jesus appeared unconvinced. Tax collectors, sinners and others of doubtful lifestyles – "Come on in!" Rich young rulers and other movers, shakers and influencers – "Not so sure about them." What was the point of all their hard work, the disciples were beginning to wonder, if others far less deserving could simply turn up and be welcomed with open arms? Peter, as spokesman for the disciples, protests "But we have left everything to follow you, Jesus!" (Matthew 19:27.) In other words, "Shouldn't we be getting some credit given all we have done for you? Don't we deserve to be at the front of the queue?"

So I think Jesus' parable of the fruit-pickers is a direct response to that complaint, and the attitude underlying it. It gets right to the heart of the disciples' (and your and my) motivation for coming to Church, for following Christ.

If in your heart of hearts you feel (and which of us doesn't?) that the missionary who has laboured in the mission field for 40 years is more deserving of God's favour than the homeless person who has just wondered into Church for the first time – think again, says Jesus! If you feel that the bishop who has worked tirelessly all his life to serve the Church is more worthy of God's favour than the alcohol-dependent business person who has never given a thought to God until today – think again, says Jesus! If you think that the disciples who followed Jesus through the ups and downs of his ministry are more entitled to God's favour than a thief who falteringly turns to Jesus with his dying breath – think again, says Jesus!

And if you think that any of these people is more – or less – deserving of God's love or favour than you .... think again, says Jesus!

All are welcome – equally welcome. You can't be a recipient of half of God's love, or a third of His mercy, or three-quarters of His grace. It's "all or nothing": and with God it is always "all".

If that makes me feel resentful of God, like Jonah resenting God's mercy to the people of Nineveh because they haven't earned it, then I am missing the point. If it makes me want to say, "So why should I bother, then?" – again, I am missing the point. Spiritual life has nothing to do with chalking up points on a spiritual scoreboard. It has everything to do with learning to be more and more open to God's free gift of the new life which wants to live in and through you and me.



Jesus' parable challenges us to reflect deeply and honestly on our attitude to God and motivation for trying to serve Him. Are we doing what we do in the hope of somehow earning His favour, of "getting into heaven"? Or are we simply responding to His free and generous gift of abundant life?

The reason we should live good lives is not because we hope that God will spare us or reward us. No. God has freely given us the gift of life and light, and to live badly is in effect to choose death over life, darkness over light.

So Jesus' parable challenges us to look long and hard inside ourselves and ask, are we living in the hope of earning God's favour or gratitude, or are we living out of a joyful response to the love which He has already shown us and will continue to show us?

And it also challenges us to ask ourselves as a community, what sort of Church will we be? One where people have to earn their place at the table? Or one where all – ourselves included - are welcomed for who we are, much-loved children of God, bearing His image?

One of the consistent insights of those who have walked the spiritual path most fully is that we are all "11<sup>th</sup>-hour recruits" who get the full day's wage. We are all those who were left waiting to be chosen for the school sports team and then given a star role. We are all equally recipients of God's free and undeserved grace and favour.

And with that knowledge comes the most wonderful, life-changing freedom and peace.



## **RESPONDING TO THE WORD**

In response to what we have heard, let us affirm our trust and faith in God:

Do you believe and trust in God the Father,  
source of all being and life,  
the one for whom we exist?

**We believe and trust in him.**

Do you believe and trust in God the Son,  
who took our human nature,  
died for us and rose again?

**We believe and trust in him.**

Do you believe and trust in God the Holy Spirit,  
who gives life to the people of God  
and makes Christ known in the world?

**We believe and trust in him.**

This is the faith of the Church.

**This is our faith.**

**We believe and trust in one God,  
Father, Son and Holy Spirit.**

**Amen.**

## **PRAYERS**

May the Spirit pray through us  
As we try to put into words the longings of our hearts  
For the church and for the world.

Loving Father, whenever we start to get offended  
by your generosity or open-mindedness,  
give us the grace to repent and join your rejoicing.  
Guard the church against self-righteousness  
and all rules and limits which you would not own,  
but always keep before us the rule of love.

*Silence*

Lord, not our will,  
**but your will be done.**

Loving Father, increase in us love  
not only for victims but for perpetrators  
of evil and violence in our world;  
for all governments  
which run on corruption and fear.  
We pray for a change of heart and attitude,  
an awakening to a better way of living,  
and the courage to reject wrong principles.

*Silence*

Lord, not our will,  
**but your will be done.**

Loving Father,  
may our closeness to family and friends  
never make us exclusive, shutting others out,  
but always inclusive, welcoming others in.  
Encourage us in outgoing hospitality  
and keep us from becoming  
possessive with those we love.

*Silence*

Lord, not our will,  
**but your will be done.**

Loving Father, we pray for all who are vulnerable  
and unable to cope with the demands of life,  
for all who are affected by addictions.  
And for all who are suffering in body, mind or spirit,  
we pray for your loving compassion to prevail.  
From our own community, we pray especially for: Ian King, Martin Kennett,  
and Cameron.  
And in a moment now we offer you those people on our own hearts.

*Silence*

Lord, not our will,  
**but your will be done.**

Loving Father, we pray for those  
who have died alone, unmourned and unnoticed,  
and we commend them to your merciful love.

We remember the recently departed:

Dave Butcher and Derek Honeybourne.

And those whose anniversary of death falls at this time:

Ray Wallace, Wyn Van Mechelen, Keith Burton, Muriel Gething, Ron Handy,  
Geoff Stroud.

Lord, grant us with them a share in your eternal kingdom.

*Silence*

Lord, not our will,  
**but your will be done.**

We pray the Lord's prayer together as Jesus taught us, saying:

**Our Father in heaven,  
hallowed be your name,  
your kingdom come,  
your will be done,  
on earth as in heaven.  
Give us today our daily bread.  
Forgive us our sins  
as we forgive those who sin  
against us.  
Lead us not into temptation  
but deliver us from evil.  
For the kingdom, the power,  
and the glory are yours  
now and for ever.  
Amen.**

**Our Father, who art in heaven,  
hallowed be thy name;  
thy kingdom come;  
thy will be done;  
on earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread.  
And forgive us our trespasses,  
as we forgive those who trespass  
against us.  
And lead us not into temptation;  
but deliver us from evil.  
For thine is the kingdom,  
the power and the glory, for ever  
and ever.  
Amen.**

Merciful Father

**Accept these prayers**

**For the sake of your Son,**

**Our Saviour, Jesus Christ. Amen.**

### **A VISION OF GOD'S KINGDOM HERE ON EARTH**

Let us build a house where love can dwell  
and all can safely live,  
a place where saints and children tell  
how hearts learn to forgive.

Built of hopes and dreams and visions,  
rock of faith and vault of grace;  
here the love of Christ shall end divisions:

*All are welcome, all are welcome,  
all are welcome in this place.*



Let us build a house where prophets speak,  
and words are strong and true,  
where all God's children dare to seek  
to dream God's reign anew.

Here the cross shall stand as witness  
and as symbol of God's grace;  
here as one we claim the faith of Jesus:

*All are welcome...*

Let us build a house where hands will reach  
beyond the wood and stone  
to heal and strengthen, serve and teach,  
and live the Word they've known.

Here the outcast and the stranger  
bear the image of God's face;  
let us bring an end to fear and danger:

*All are welcome...*



## **ENDING**

From where we are now  
To where You want us to be

**Jesus, lead us on.**

From the security of what we know  
To the adventure of what You will reveal

**Jesus, lead us on.**

To refashion the fabric of this world  
Until it takes on the shape of your Kingdom

**Jesus, lead us on.**

Because we know that nothing can separate us from your love

**Jesus, lead us on.**

**And may the blessing of God Almighty,  
Father, Son and Holy Spirit,  
be with us all evermore.  
Amen.**

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*Be Still for the Presence of the Lord, Lyrics and Music by David J Evans (b.1957)*

*Let us Build a House (All are Welcome), Lyrics by Marty Haugen (b.1952)*