

Living the Life 5: God in my work

Matthew 20:1-16

18th October 2009

Encounter @ 9.00

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How do we hire somebody these days?

There's usually an attractive ad:

rewards; good working conditions, pay and perks.

pay is often the 'headline'

The ad states expectations: qualities, previous experience;

Tells us something about the role

For the employer there's a 'What we'll give/what we'll get'

For the prospective employee there's a 'What you'll give/what you'll get'

In bible times: the marketplace was our 'situation vacant' column...

Those who needed employment would place their own personal ad in the marketplace by bringing themselves there. By being available and ready; by bringing the tools of their trade with them.

In the 12 hours from dawn til sunset there would be a normal working day of 10 hours.

And a basic wage for a labourer would be one denarius.

So here's the story:

Landowner...who goes to the marketplace and who returns time after time after time after time. 5 times in all. Dawn, nine o'clock, midday, 3pm and 5pm.

Tells us the landowner has great perseverance.

This vineyard owner is committed to getting the job done, and not above using all kinds of people to accomplish the task.

It tells us something about this job, too...it turns out to be perhaps surprisingly involved; it seems to develop as time goes on, and the landowner has to respond accordingly.

The landowner, in his use of labourers, doesn't just 'use' people; this landowner is committed to justice and fairness. Not the kind of justice

and fairness that most of us understand: in terms of money and material rewards.

This is the kind of justice that doesn't raise one person over another; the kind of fairness that doesn't burden one group at the expense of another. Justice of the levelling kind.

This landowner has a desire for all to be useful, all are considered of value and worth.

What is your experience of being chosen?

Were you usually the captain of the team doing the choosing; or were you usually the person who was last to be picked, maybe with the sense of being an unwelcome addition?

Imagine for a moment that you are that labourer in the marketplace. You have with you your tools, your gifts and talents, your willingness to be useful, you have yourself with all its goodness and strengths and with all its failings and weaknesses.

It is early, the sun is just rising and into the marketplace strides the imposing figure of the landowner. His eyes sweep the group of people who are with you. You maybe raise your head to look a little taller, a little stronger than others.

And then he points to you and invites you to come and be part of his work.

What an honour.

What recognition. Perhaps relief....

(choose certain individuals)....will you come and work today for one denarius?

How did you feel? *(to the chosen ones?)*

to those not chosen:

You've been there in the marketplace, you had yourself ready; the landowner sweeps in but he hasn't chosen you. He goes off with a different group of people and you are left behind.

What feelings go thru your mind?

Do you feel less than those who have been chosen?

Do you feel doubtful about your own gifts and abilities?

Or do you feel some awareness that you could do the job if only you had the chance?

Maybe you feel resentful that you have not been chosen.

And then, it's nine o'clock and the landowner returns, explaining that the work needs others – people with different gifts and talents.
Back two rows are chosen.

How do you feel, - still left behind, not chosen?

How do you feel, from the two back rows, not chosen as individuals, but chosen more as a group?

Now, it's midday.

The landowner returns to pick up some surprising people. Not for the usual visible gifts of physical ability or intellectual agility. The landowner wants this group of people because he has a secret purpose for them which is known only to him and will only be fully known and understood by us on the other side of eternity.

This group of people are all those who are physically burdened, mentally scared, emotionally fragile, spiritually poor.

Represented by those sitting at the end of every row.

To the first group of individuals that were chosen:

It's now 3pm – I guess you're tired. Let's bring in more people to give you a break because resting is an essential part of work. But I don't want you off the scene. You have valuable experience and you'll need to pass that on to the next group.

So (*other individuals*) please go and learn from our dawn-labourers, and take over from them.

It's now five o'clock

I can remember a time when I was very young, waiting for my Christmas present in a Xmas party organised by the forces to which my dad was connected. I wasn't concerned, I had been waiting a long while, but I was OK about that. And then someone said, don't worry, your name will be called. I hadn't worried it wouldn't have been, until that moment....

Tentatively, I suggest this group left here might be concerned – they've not been chosen.

Even if unconcerned on account of themselves and the possible overlooking of their gifts they would surely be concerned that their families would go hungry this day because there were no wages.

So come, you too. You also are chosen to join the workforce and to be useful, productive and valuable.

What is your experience of being chosen?
Which group do you think you'd have been in?

We began by thinking about vacancy ads.
How do you think this one would play out?
Work for the average wage with no time commitment!!
Labourers required; flexible working hours – pay of one denarius guaranteed!!
All labourers welcome to apply; no-one turned away!!

Too good to be true? Is that employer up to something?
There's got to be a catch...
Or
That's no way to run a business.

But of course we are not talking about paid employment as we know it.
This passage leads us to think about something much more important than that.
We're talking about the project closest to God's own heart: the Kingdom of Heaven.
We're talking a mighty harvest.
We're talking of the on-going project of fruitfulness that is God's master plan.
And we're not talking about one day; we're talking about eternity.
Any work that we do is set in that context.

Because we are not talking about paid employment alone, but about the work of the kingdom, to which each person is called.
This message comes to you who are too young to 'work'
It comes to you who are too old to 'work'; those who have retired or who are seeing retirement on the near horizon.
This message comes to you who are 'unemployed' at the moment
And to you who are employed and who love what you do,
And you who are employed and really hate what you do...and all who fall somewhere inbetween.

This message is suggesting that all of life is work in a sense; or can be if we are in the landowner's employ. So the lessons from this passage can

be folded into all parts of our lives, including our employment, but not exclusive to it.

The nature of the task:

Notice this task takes even the landowner unawares...otherwise I guess he'd have hired the whole bunch right at the outset if he knew exactly how the harvest was going to pan out.

This project of the kingdom of heaven is ever changing and ever growing. But there is another reason why the landowner choose labourers group by group, for different periods of time: and that is the main purpose of this work:

Partnership.

Because whatever our work, we are called to be in partnership.

In partnership with God, with the landowner;

In partnership with others – our fellow labourers... possibly the hardest task of all: to get along with others in whatever we do... to show the same value of them, the same acceptance, the same non-judgemental attitudes.

All because whether we do more or whether we do less than others...we are not to stand in judgement over anyone ...neither are we to stand in awe of anyone.

And the reason for that is the landowner himself. God.

This passage teaches us a lot about the employer: the landowner:

God's grace and mercy...shown esp to those who might have cause to doubt their worth and value. Ones who we might assess as being 'last'.

We learn of God's shock tactics...those who were last got the first handout....actually that is what set the cat among the pigeons; if the first were given their paychecks first – all of this upheaval could have been avoided. But no, God pulled out those shock tactics and paraded those who had been scooped up from the marketplace at the 11th hour; making no secret that they were going to get the same terms and conditions as those who had worked the whole working day (actually with a couple of hours overtime)

We might have thought those who were last were going to get a small proportion of the original deal made with the dawn labourers; or, like those dawn labourers who'd worked all day, we like them might have judged from the 'last' receiving the original deal of one denarius, the labourers hired first would get a bigger deal.

It teaches us about God's generosity and about his bias to the poor, the last, those on the margins.

God's justice has a very different face from the justice we imagine.

God's perseverance

God's assessment of each labourer: that they are of worth and value for who they are.

So whether you are among the first of the labourers - those gainfully employed and chosen in the first half of the day

Or whether you are among the last - those unemployed for most of the day and yet who rode in like the cavalry ...know this concerning your suitability for employment in the kingdom of heaven: you are of infinite worth to God and to his project.

Riding Lights: a production called: Origins and Lemons

"you can identify the chemical composition of a human being, and work out how much the ingredients are worth – about 87pence – 'but that's not what you are, it's just what you are made of.'"

We are worth more than 87p

We are worth more than many sparrows,

Each of us has great value to God.

Each one of us is of infinite worth to him.

The true worth of a (man) person is not to be found(in man himself) within that person, but in the colours and textures that come alive in others.

Albert Schweitzer

God in our work...hope we've agreed that our work is all of our life.

But we work not to earn our way.

We work not to prove our value.

We work not to justify our worth, nor to carve out our identity.

Work is not about how many hours we do, nor the quality of the work we do;

Work is not about what we get paid, nor what we get in return for hours put in;

Work is not about our effort or our outcome.

Work is the opportunity we have to be part of the kingdom. Work is our chance to show who and what God has made us to be; in relationship/in partnership with God and with others.

We work because we are already of great worth; we work because we are infinitely valuable. We work because each one of us is called and chosen.

We work because each one of us has something to offer.

This is the true work to which all of us are called because we are valuable:

To be ready and available, just like those labourers in the marketplace. We are to be listening and attentive to God's summons, to be ready for his call to the work of the kingdom.

And the really hard part of that –even beyond listening, readiness and availability, is looking on our fellow labourers with that same love, grace and mercy that God looks on each one of us.

That's hard work isn't it?

To look on our fellow labourers (remembering they are not just the people who are our work - as in employment - colleagues, although these are included...these are also the people with whom we share our lives – family, friends, casual acquaintances) and we are to walk alongside them with acceptance, with encouragement, with respect, with forgiveness, with justice, with generosity.

The true worth of a person is not to be found within that person, but in the colours and textures that come alive in others. Look around, work hard at getting on well with others, employ yourself to searching out the colours and textures that are within each person you come alongside in your life, cultivating these qualities of generosity towards others; because here and now and beyond.... within the timeframe of the kingdom of God...we are all chosen to work together for the equal reward of God's blessing.