

## A short sermon for Celebrating Education Sunday, 20 Sept 2020

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When I read the Gospel reading and realised that today's theme is 'Celebrating Education', I confess that my first thought was that 'the first will be last and the last will be first' sounds like a description of how the Government's grades algorithm worked!

I shouldn't joke about the grades fiasco as I know how difficult the past six months have been for so many young people and their families. What a tough time it has been. Actually, if anything, the concern with the algorithm was cementing social advantage - the socially first *were*, more than usual, first.

My second thought, on reading the parable about labourers not properly remunerated for their efforts, was of how we value (or not) our teachers, school leaders and support staff. This is not just because I'm married to a teacher and would benefit if her wages went up! Before being ordained, I worked as a Secondary Science teacher in London and I know enough teachers to know how incredibly hard they work: because the work of educating is so important and because they care so much about the pupils and students. The same is true for those lecturing, teaching and supervising in our University, who I have got to know through my chaplaincy role. In today's parable, perhaps teachers are most like the owner of the vineyard, who works tirelessly the whole day to ensure all are positively engaged in gainful employment - even those unpicked, undesirables still loitering in the market place near to the end of the day. We should be grateful to all who work in education - and as a society - value them accordingly.

The parable, though, is about grace. The Vineyard owner explains that he's not actually being *unfair* to the labourer who, as he points out, got the payment previously agreed: he is being *generous* to those who got the same wage despite being employed when most of the work was done...

That may be the case but it is still hard not to sympathise with those feeling disgruntled - the worker may have got the wages, but it's not fair when the workers compare between themselves! As anyone who spends any amount of time with young children is constantly reminded, a sense of fairness is deeply wired within us. It even goes beyond children - some of you may have seen the amusing video online of Capuchin monkeys getting different rewards for the same simple task. When one monkey repeatedly gets cucumber while their fellow monkey gets grapes, they end up launching the piece of cucumber - which in normal

circumstances is a treat - at the experimenter at great speed! Fair enough! Grape beats cucumber every time!

Back to our parable, you can almost feel the excited expectation of the whole-day workers watching the latecomers, who are paid first, getting their denarius... the boss is in a generous mood how much more will they receive! But no! Just a denarius - the usual daily wage - too. A poxy denarius.

And this is the scandal of Amazing grace - it is unfair. When it comes to the grace of God this is good news for us! The gift of God's love for each of us is not given or withheld according to how much we deserve it. As Philip Yancey wrote, "Grace means there is nothing I can do to make God love me more, and nothing I can do to make God love me less."

Then again, our parable doesn't conclude 'the first and last will be the same' - the last will be first. What could this be about? Our reading follows chapter 19 of Matthew in which we hear about the rich young man - first in the eyes of the world - who can't bring himself to give up everything and the disciples, by contrast, who have given up all and become 'last'. That chapter ends with Jesus saying 'many who are *first* will be last, and the last will be first.' Our parable has the same message of reversal, but interestingly gives the other way around, starting with 'the last' and saying: 'So the *last* will be first, and the first will be last.' The workers that no-one else wanted - the last - are the first to receive their wages. In the Kingdom of God, those rejected by society are restored and honoured.

Yes, we cannot do anything to earn grace, God's gift of love, - but perhaps there are ways to live our life that enable us to appreciate it more; to depend upon it.

God's Kingdom way is one which upsets the social order and re-values what is valuable. An order centred on grace is one which recognises life as the gift of God and the giftedness of others as we seek to be a gift to one another. In education this points to a broad appreciation of the different ways people are gifted - going beyond a narrow focus on awarding attainment in limited areas.

God's gift of Grace can also inspire us to be gracious gift givers. In a world which expects to be paid back, the great reversal is for a way of life that pays forwards: giving generously of our time, our talents and our things for the benefit of others. Thinking about education and educators, I bet we can all think of a teacher that has inspired us by going above and beyond their duty. In doing so they have been a gracious gift and a modern sign and parable of God's way of unmerited favour. As we 'celebrate education', we give thanks for all who labour to help others learn. We also give thanks for Amazing Grace, the unmerited gift of God's love which transforms us and the world. Amen