Sermon for Sunday September 20th 2020

**The first will be last and the last will be first.**

Lord take my words and speak through them; take our thoughts and think through them; take our hearts and hold them in the palm of your hand.

When I looked at today’s readings a couple of weeks ago (it takes me quite a while to prepare a sermon don’t you know) I hoped that it would be quite straightforward to talk about a Vineyard owner and his approach to paying all of his workers the same wage no matter how many hours they had actually worked on a particular day. Words like fairness, equity and equality quickly came to mind because the message in verse 16 is quite clear:

**‘The first will be last and the last will be first’**

But I never quite know where a I’m going with a sermon until I get there. I thought about the tortoise and the hare made famous by Aesop...’Slow and Steady wins the race’- which is also a great lesson for those of us whose running days are long since over.

I mentioned all of this to Terry who sometimes helps me with my sermons - in his own inimitable way - and his eyes lit up as he suggested that perhaps Liverpool would come last in the Premier League this season! We can only dream that if Everton win a few more matches like they did yesterday (Saturday) they might end the season at the top of the league! I know, it takes a bit of imagination!

God’s creation of the world was the ultimate act of imagination. When He spoke, worlds came into being and life evolved in all its glory.....trees, plants, humans and animals – adapting to the land, the skies and the oceans. All we had to do was look after it all and honour God. Simples!

When humanity messed up, as we do, God loved us all so much that he sent us His only son to live amongst us, to teach us again about His kingdom and how to achieve eternal life. He came to teach us about Love.

Jesus used stories, signs and miracles to share the thrill and majesty of God at work in human history because people had forgotten to be astonished by Him.

I’m sure that we all have our favourite authors... storytellers who can capture our hearts and minds with their mastery of words and emotions. They introduce us to characters who utter the most memorable of phrases...Maybe it’s Shakespeare- ‘Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art thou Romeo?’ Or Dickens, Jane Austen, Sebastian Faulks (I can highly recommend Birdsong) or the Bronte sisters. One of my favourites is JK Rowling who introduced us to Harry Potter’s world of wizardry, the sorting hat and the Ministry of Magic.......

But Jesus was the masterful storyteller ... all of his words painted pictures of our heavenly Father and were underpinned by His love for us and his desire to protect and bless us.

When he told the story about the Landowner who offered work for the usual daily wage in his vineyard to the labourers who were waiting in the market place, whether it was early in the morning or at other times during the day, he caused quite a stir. As we heard earlier, some of the labourers who had worked all day weren’t very happy that they were paid the same as those who had worked fewer hours. But Jesus was very clear. The generous Landowner chose to give the same daily wage to both the first and the last because it was a fair wage and that is what he had agreed to do.

And so it is with the Kingdom of God. Those who are saved later in life are no less saved than those who come to Christ at an earlier age. How could that even be possible? The benefits of Salvation are the same for all. The blessings we receive from God are not contingent on the blessings of others. We don’t get bonus loyalty points based on the length of our Christianity. We are all called to be labourers in the vineyard.

Jesus was a man of his time, a product of his nation’s history and culture so this story, like all of the others, was grounded in the reality of the Jewish religious system that was defined by the laws contained in the Torah, the Bible. The law declared that the agreed daily wage for a labourer was the same as for a soldier in the Roman army and that wages were paid on a daily basis at sundown. Everyone who heard the story knew this and they understood the precise wording of the parable. No one could argue against the law which had been developed over centuries to help the Israelites to maintain their high moral standards in the face of adversity. Especially not the Pharisees who hung on every word Jesus spoke trying to catch him out but couldn’t.

And when it came to the interpretation of the law, sin and holiness, the Pharisees were professionals. They memorized the first five books of the Bible and they seemed to spend their days planning how they could fulfil every commandment and every letter of every law that men had written over hundreds of years which dictated that anyone who was not Jewish, male, circumcised, healthy and without any disabilities was a sinner and couldn’t be holy. For them, it was all rules and very little love. And for anyone who didn’t meet their criteria it was all downhill!

Thank goodness Jesus focussed on love. He invites us to do the same. I read a lovely quote about love this week...’Love is not what you say...love is what you do’

Let’s do love today and every day. Let’s be labourers in the vineyard.

In his letter to the Philippians, St Paul advises us to live in a way that we are a credit to Jesus; to be united in our in our faith and trust in God. That’s really good advice!

Being a Christian is not about being good, or being perfect. It’s not about being holy and coming to church on a Sunday. It’s not about our jobs, politics, wealth or social status, although our Christianity informs all of these things. It’s about our relationships with God and each other. It’s about Grace and Love. It’s about understanding that equality is giving everyone shoes but equity is about giving everyone shoes that fit. It’s about Jesus. Jesus is the way, the truth and the life. Jesus is the point of life. That being our truth, we have to try to be the best that we can possibly be. Not to be first, although that is always nice, nor even last; just simply be the best Christians we can be. There is nothing better.

My mum used to tell us as children that we are all equal in the eyes of God. She was right of course. We are. We have to help others to know that too.

As Christians, we know that God loves all of us. He gave His only son so that everyone who believes in Him will have eternal life. That gift didn’t come with caveats. Jesus did not live amongst us and die on a cross just for a chosen few. He died for all of us because we matter to Him. We **all** matter to him. No matter what our creed or colour. We may need to pray about this week.

As we head into the new week to negotiate our latest covid restrictions (Good luck with that everyone!) I’d like to share a thought from Michel Quoist:

‘If we knew how to look at the world through God’s eyes, all of life would become a sign. If we knew how to listen, all of life would become a prayer’

Take care, stay safe, and God Bless us all.

Amen.