

Sunday 24 September 2023, Trinity 16 Choral Eucharist

Matthew 20:1-16

The Revd Dr Evan McWilliams

What do you think God owes you?

I realise this is a strange question, so I'll ask it again: What do you think God owes you? You may well answer, 'Nothing'-- and I applaud the desire to be theologically self-aware. But even if we say that God owes us nothing, I wonder whether a little part of us deep inside still feels a sense of expectation. God owes me good things if I obey him. God will bless me if I'm kind to other people. If I follow these commandments, I expect to be rewarded.

If you were here last week, you may remember that we thought about debts. The gospel reading mentioned two servants who were forgiven debts because their Lord had pity on them. Their reaction to this forgiveness was at the heart of the story. The parable Jesus tells in today's gospel looks at debts in a different way. Instead of thinking about what we owe God and one another, we're pushed to consider what God owes us.

Workers in a vineyard are recruited at different times of day and they each agree for a certain wage. At the end of the day, those who have worked for the longest receive their wage and are shocked to see that those who worked for only a little while are given exactly the same wage. This profoundly unfair state of affairs leads to the owner of the vineyard responding thus: *Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage?... Or are you envious because I am generous?*

Each worker agreed individually for a wage. At the end of the day, he received that wage. That others had agreed for the same wage and done less work was neither here nor there. They received what had been agreed. And it was solely the vineyard owner's generosity that gave to one who had worked few hours the same wage as the one who had worked from morning to night. What do you think God owes you?

Do you think that you should receive more blessing because you've been a Christian longer than someone else? Do you think you deserve a better outcome in life because you've done a better job at keeping every jot and tittle of the law than someone else? Do you see someone who has worked less hard than you at being a "good person" receiving a blessing and find yourself upset at their good fortune? If you haven't felt this way at one time or another, you've been truly blessed. But I imagine most of us, even if only once, have felt cheated by God or envious of someone else's blessing. Jesus wouldn't have told the parable if he didn't think his hearers would understand. *Are you envious because I am generous?* What do you think God owes you?

Let me suggest one answer to the question of God's owing. What God owes is what he agreed with us. Nothing more; nothing less. What he agreed can be summarised in many

ways, but I think St Paul's letter to the Philippians does a pretty decent job: *he has graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well.* The privilege of believing in Christ. That's the first thing God has agreed with us. Believing in Christ means knowledge of the one who made us and the whole universe, who formed us in our mother's womb. Believing in Christ means receiving the good teaching and example of Jesus, including that of his parables, so that we can know how to live well in the world. Believing in Christ means, as St John says so simply, *that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.* Our agreed wage is knowing God personally, being enabled to live a righteous life, and obtaining eternal life at the last.

But there's a second thing agreed in our wage: *the privilege of suffering for him as well.* The privilege of suffering for Christ. I don't know about you but 'suffering' and 'privilege' are not words I usually put in the same sentence. But St Paul does. Why? Just a little earlier in his letter to the Philippians, St Paul says this: *I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.* Suffering for Christ is a privilege because through it we become like Christ. And if we become like Christ in our life, we will become like him in our death and resurrection. The privilege of suffering is the privilege of being able to look death in the face and know we will pass through it unharmed. The privilege of becoming like Christ in his suffering is becoming like him in his resurrection: strong, deathless, glorious.

The wage that God, the owner of this vineyard, our world, agrees with us who believe in him- his workers- is the same for each one of us. Whether we started at the beginning of our day as relatively innocent children or at the end of the day as older, not-so-innocent adults, we receive from him the same generous wage. And that wage is the privilege of believing in Christ and of being conformed to his image, being made like him in both our suffering and in our triumph.

What God owes us is the wage he has agreed. And that wage is generous because it is life itself, true life in and through Jesus. All our labours ended we will find everlasting joy and bliss. And it will have been worth every moment, those cool mornings of blessing and the blazing high heat of noonday pain and suffering. Because we will be like Jesus- radiant, eternal, and forever beautiful in God's sight. Amen.