

The Big Issue for the workers in the vineyard – and me

Among the gospel writers only Matthew has the parable of the workers in the vineyard: he didn't get it from Mark, nor does he share it with Luke. Nevertheless, it sounds to me like an authentic piece of Jesus' teaching: the sort of story he loved to tell. So what is its point?

In the context in which Matthew has set it, it relates to the teaching Jesus has just given to his disciples about rewards for those who, as Peter says, *have left everything to follow him* – unlike the rich young man whose approach to Jesus prompted this teaching. Matthew picks up on Jesus' concluding saying in Mark, that *many that are last will be first and the first last* and inserts this parable to illustrate that point.

Except it doesn't do that very well: the explicit reference to *last* and *first* is in the ordering of the payments to the workers: necessary for the parable to work, but hardly the point of the story. Divine reversal of earthly fortunes is an authentic biblical theme (witness the parable of the rich man and Lazarus; and Mary's *Magnificat*, derived from Hannah's song in the Jewish scriptures, *putting down the mighty and exalting the lowly*). But in this parable, the vineyard-owner is not a reverser, but a leveller: paying all his workers equally. Arguably it is those who worked all day who *put themselves down* by their reaction: rather than recognising the landowner's generosity, they've come to think that they are entitled to receive more than the wage they previously agreed. That is what appears to be the point of the parable. Tom Wright thinks Jesus is balancing what he has said to his disciples about rewards: they shouldn't start thinking of themselves as worth more than anyone else who accepts Jesus. But the parable would fit well alongside others Jesus told when the religious elite criticised him for the grace he demonstrated to tax collectors and sinners – particularly the conversation with the elder brother in the parable of the prodigal son.

Even where parables have lost their original context, they retain their power as stories which invite succeeding generations of Christians to revise our perceptions, attitudes and actions; a lens through which we can review the world without and within.

The incident which this parable suggested to me was my purchase last week in Norwich of a copy of the *Big Issue*. I happily support homelessness charities; but I confess I've always felt very uncomfortable about encountering homeless people. There's an element of guilt: I have everything I need to be comfortable; here are people who don't. I fear the demands I imagine they are making of me simply by being on the street: demands I feel reluctant or powerless to meet; and I'm defensive about being taken advantage of by statements of desperate need – particularly if I'm in my clergy collar. I'm sure I'm far from alone in this sense of discomfort. Other emotional reactions to homeless people are more hostile, from allegations that they are lazy or worthless, to verbal or physical assault. Our parable isn't about homeless people; but throughout the day the vineyard owner encounters those standing around in the market place. Earlier on he recruits them without question; but come five o'clock in the afternoon I sense a certain implication when he asks, *Why are you standing here idle all day?* Here are people not making a positive contribution to society.

I don't often walk through Norwich city centre, but I know when I do I'm going to see evidence of homelessness. And I'm likely to be approached by more than one seller of the *Big Issue*. With its emphasis on contemporary urban culture it's not a magazine I'm enthusiastic about paying over the odds for; but I know that's not the point. So this time I bought one from the first seller I saw – at least I would have a reason to decline later approaches.

But when I got home I was interested to discover I'd bought the 35th anniversary edition, with articles about the magazine's inception, reminding me about its purpose: to provide a means for homeless people to start to work their way out of their predicament; and to campaign to tackle not just rough sleeping, but the root causes of homelessness. Vendors sign a declaration to get their badge and then buy discounted copies of the magazine to sell on to customers at a profit: in the words of the *Big Issue*'s strap-line, it's *a hand up, not a handout*. The magazine prompted me to listen to the *Big Issue* edition of *The Reunion* on *BBC Sounds* and to hear not only from founder John, now Lord, Bird (a former rough sleeper and criminal offender) but of the experiences of past vendors. How the way people avoid, ignore, or confront homeless people contributes to their sense of worthlessness. How engaging with potential customers builds self-confidence and encourages friendly interaction (you sell more magazines that way). Like the landowner in the parable, the *Big Issue* gives those standing idle in the market place an opportunity to earn some money. But that *hand up* can be the beginning of a journey to participation in the society from which they have been excluded by a combination of disadvantage, circumstance and the attitudes of the rest of us. And to me that accords well with the landowner's equal payment to all his workers: those who stood around most of the day are treated on an equal footing with those who have no trouble getting a job. When the latter group complain, the landowner challenges them; the parable similarly challenges those whose sense of entitlement hinders them from approving of inclusion and generosity towards those they see as less deserving. My *Big Issue* purchase highlighted to me that I'm not just buying a magazine: I'm potentially giving a little lift to someone who may not feel they deserve it; and buying into a movement to offer inclusion and equality to those on our streets.

Of course, that's not what Jesus had in mind or what the parable is about, any more than it's promoting a radical pay policy for the world of employment: I'm sure economists could tell us why paying everybody the same wouldn't work. But for me, last week, that was the point of the parable. And although I imagine the rewards in Jesus' story are heavenly, the attitudes it calls into question are definitely earthly. And don't we pray each day, from Matthew's version of the Lord's Prayer, for God's will to be done *on earth as it is in heaven*? On the streets of Norwich and Great Yarmouth, as in Jesus' parabolic market place?