Matthew 20:1-16: "The Generous Landlord"
Preached at Aldenham 20/9/2026

Let the Words of my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts be ever acceptable in your sight, O God our rock and our redeemer. Amen

The parable that we heard read this morning is referred to in most bibles as the Parable of Workers in the Vineyard, but, I want to suggest to you that it could have a different title, that it could equally well be called the Parable of the Generous Landlord.

Whatever one calls this parable, however, it is for many of us one of the few parables left in the Bible that still has the power to disturb or even to anger us.

There is something about this parable which appears to offend many people, and if you think about it for a minute or two you can see why.

Jesus tells his disciples that the kingdom of heaven is like a landlord who hires help at various times through out the day, so that some work twelve hours, some nine, some six, and some, the last ones hired, work for only one hour.

So far so good, a normal situation that we can all relate to, but what follows next is, according to some people, not quite so good, because, at the end of the day, when the boss pays off his workers, those he hired last receive not one hour's pay but a whole day's pay.

Now that's great for them, but what happens after that according to many people doesn't seem quite so fair, what happens is that those who worked all day long in the heat of the sun only get a day's pay, the same as those who had worked for only one hour.

Is this fair? Many people do not think so.

Certainly the workers who slaved all day in the heat did not think so, and so they grumbled and then complained to the landlord, "these men who were hired last worked only one hour and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day"

It is an interesting point.

Has something like this ever happened to you? Has it ever happened that you have had to work hard to get something, and then some "Johnny-come-lately" breezes in and gets the same thing without putting in all of the effort?

If it has, then you can understand where the labourers who worked all day long are coming from. If it has then you can understand why the Landlords answer doesn't sit too well with some people, the answer that he gives is: - "don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money"

It is an upsetting parable, upsetting if you look at it from the point of view of someone who believes that those

who work harder and longer deserve more than those who work for less time and without as much difficulty.

The problem that these people have, however, is precisely that; We look at the parable, in fact we often look at life, from a point of view that is simply not God's point of view, but our own.

Before going on let us remember that the workers who were hired in the morning received everything that was due to them for their labour.

They were contracted to do a day's work for a day's wage, and they were paid for that. That is the primary fact that we need to remember. But we might also remember that those workers who were hired first had a great privilege, they knew from the very beginning of the day that they had work, and they knew that they would be paid fairly for it.

Now, let us look at the parable from the point of view of those hired last. All day they stood around in the unemployment line as landlords came and went, but they were not hired. At home they had family and nothing to feed them with, hope disappeared for them as the sun cut its course across the sky.

They longed to be in the fields under that hot sun working for someone and at the end of the day being paid a wage which would feed and cloth their family.

And finally, just as their last hope is about to set with the setting sun someone comes and hires them and tells them that they will receive whatever is fair.

And they go, and they work with the hope of bringing home something, a small portion of a day's wage, enough, maybe, to survive another day and maybe not.

It can be tough, being an outsider, being one who has no hope, or very little hope, And I'm not talking here about unemployment although I know what that is as well. I'm talking about no hope, or very little at the best.

And so you can imagine just how those who were hired last felt when the time to be paid came.

They didn't feel very good at all, they knew that they were going to get something, but would it be sufficient to go around?
would it really help them all that much?
would it be enough to feed their wife and their children?
Who might have to go without?
who could afford to eat less?

But then, the landlord does something completely crazy, something completely wild, completely unexpected, completely and totally generous, something beyond their wildest dreams... He gives them a full day's wage.

He gives them a full day's wage even though they haven't earned it, He gives them enough to live on, He gives them their families, their homes, their very lives.

And that's incredible isn't it? But that is what happened, And, that is what the kingdom of heaven is like.

So what is really the problem with this parable?
Why are some people so unhappy with it?
Why do the workers who worked all day grumble and complain?

I think it is because they have forgotten just how lucky they are?

They are so used to the certainty of their salvation, they are so used to being part of God's work and being guaranteed their reward that they can no longer remember or imagine what being outside is like, what being without God is like. They forget, and they begin to complain, and their complaints are based the worst of all things, they are based on comparisons, and selfish ones at that.

"I've worked harder,
I've been here longer,
I've done more.
I had to go through this, so should you."

All sense of their own blessedness and good fortune disappears.

How sad it is.

But praise God, praise God because the kingdom of God does not work that way, the kingdom of God works on the basis of God's love and not upon the basis of what we deserve.

And it is a good thing too, for those who laboured all day could very well have been those who were not hired until the very end, they could of been those, who, as in so many of this world's markets never get hired.

I believe that if the people who are now working in the vineyard, would only remember how blessed, and how lucky they are, they would stop grumbling and complaining about other people. What I am saying is that many people, perhaps each of us sitting here this morning, perhaps not, need to refresh our thinking about life and about God.

Look at the parable in another way, look at it in terms of someone you love, who dies...

Sometimes a person dies full of years and honour , with his or her days work ended and their task completed. Sometimes a young person dies before the doors of life and achievement have been barely opened to them.

The parable of the Generous Landlord teaches us that from God both will receive the same welcome.

We may be the workers who have worked all day in the heat, but we will be paid what we agreed to, we are secure and safe, we know what is coming to us, and that, it is enough, and as such it is not for us to grumble and complain because God reaches out to others and treats them well.

There is Gospel in this parable. The Gospel of The Landlord's love. The Gospel of God's love.

The Landlord looks at us, our God looks at us, and he sees our needs and he meets those needs. And the question in God's mind is not 'how much do these people deserve?'; but rather, 'how can I help them? how can I save them before they perish?'

And that is God's right, and God's pleasure, just as it is a landlord's right and pleasure to be generous with his help, to give them more than they deserve, to make their hearts glad if he or she so choses.

It is all about grace and blessings, It is grace to be hired in the morning, and grace to be hired at noon time, and grace to be hired near the end of the day. And we would do well to remember it.

Jesus said "The last will be first, and the first last." not to tell us how things are in the world, but to warn those who are first about the dangers of forgetting how we got to be first, the danger of being so comfortable in our position of being first that we dare to question God's love for others who happen along after us.

The parable of the Generous Landlord is offensive, if you believe that God's love is something that you earn.

It is offensive, if you weigh and measure other people rather than really try to love them as God loves them.

It is offensive, if you do not cry over the hunger of the unemployed and weep over those who are wasting their lives away in things that do not profit them.

It is offensive, if you are the kind of trade unionist who believes that seniority is the only important thing, or the kind of business man who thinks that generosity only counts if it is tax deductable.

But for those who have eyes to see and ears to hear the parable is glorious news about God's love for us all, Indeed, it is a source of hope and strength for everyone who is called to labour in God's field rather than be left to perish in the marketplace with those who have not been chosen.

May our prayer to God this morning be this:

O thou who hast given so much to me, give me one thing more, a grateful heart, and help me Lord to remember that while it is possible to give without loving, it is impossible to love without giving. AMEN