

TRINITY 15: 2020

Cheerful headlines are hard to find! At a time of great job insecurity as well as health insecurity, I read last week:

“BBC boots Ball up pay league but Linekar still top.” Surely I was not alone in saying aloud ‘Really?’ or even something a little stronger! But to calm any fears I may have had, there was a further revelation: “Linekar has agreed a new deal for football presenting that will see his BBC pay **fall** to around £1.35m a year, down from £1.7m.”

For some reason, I didn’t say to myself ‘Wow, that’s really generous’, because...I was also thinking about those Walker crisps he sells in that rather self-satisfied kind of way...over and against something I shared at my first PCC last week, that our Diocese is experiencing a 32% fall in income since March, some £2 million, which – to you and me – is a HUGE deficit for those of us who are not ‘celebrities’ and never will be. The cry, ‘It is just not fair’, is a fair grumble and complaint in anyone’s hearing.

It is, ironically, Matthew, the tax collector, who tells a similar tale but turns it on its head: The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner we perhaps have never known or understood before. But as Andy said eloquently last Sunday, there’s an important difference to explore between debt and indebtedness.

Of course, we are drawn into the presenting story of labourers who got to work only at the last minute and received the same wage as those who had laboured and sweated in the sun all day. Of course, we would shout out, ‘It is just not fair’...and in a more modern parable we would refer the matter to a Trade Union or Tribunal so that a fairer outcome could be made; ‘the last will receive least and the first will receive most’ so let’s negotiate proper, fairer salaries. Let’s talk sensibly about that!’

In following Christ, Matthew has left his old life behind. It may seem to be another tale about money matters or even justice. The huge disparity of earnings in our own society remain worrying, I believe. But that is a different narrative from the one we are being asked to hear and interpret in our Gospel of the day. We are hearing the words of someone whose whole world view has been turned around and like the best convert wants us to stand up and notice.

The new headline reads: “The **last** will be first, and the first will be last.” This is where the story takes on a completely new meaning. The landowner’s hands-on invitation to each and every labourer is to welcome them into the world of work regardless of what work they have done before, or how hard they have worked. And so we have to translate that challenge and truth into our own communities of faith where we live and finally let go of what is sometimes referred to as the ‘Protestant work ethic’...

If we work hard enough and long enough, get on the right committees, and keep in with the right people, we will surely be rewarded in the kingdom of heaven. No. The landowner is neither interested in our rights or privileges but instead our indebtedness to the God and Father of us all. It does not matter about our track record, our qualifications, or status as we might have thought previously. We cannot earn a place in the kingdom of God. God is gracious to everyone alike, regardless of past achievements, regardless of the hours of slog and the genuine contribution we feel we have sincerely offered.

That **is** the good news story though, the one we have to discover for ourselves in our own time and in our own way. It is not our business to worry about the latest ‘rich list’ and who’s on it or not; we need to seek the richest treasure of all, the same treasure Matthew discovered and shares with us still: the complete generosity of God and compassion of God when we least expect it or deserve it.

I think also of the criminal crucified with Christ at Calvary. He was not deserving of anything but of Jesus he made a simple request: “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” To which Jesus replied, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.” And so a criminal enters God’s kingdom first through God’s gracious invitation and with God’s open blessing.

Matthew, whose feast day falls tomorrow, would have reflected deeply on that moment and how our vocation to be with God is not something we can earn but instead something we can rejoice in **because** it is freely given. Because of God’s grace, we should all feel like those workers hired last, and be filled with gratitude and thanksgiving that God has chosen us at all.

And do we need more labourers in the vineyard of the Church catholic? Yes, of course. Do we need our household of faith to deepen and grow? Yes, of course. But none of it is possible without God doing the inviting and saying to each of

us, 'Follow me' and discover the priceless grapes to pick and savour and share in God's future.