

**Exodus 16:2-15 and Matthew 20:1-16**

**A Sermon by Rev Carol Harley for Sunday 20.09.20**

*May my words be true to God. Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen*

It's no joke, being unemployed. My Carer's husband has just lost his job as a result of the COVID pandemic.

No joke for him and maybe not for you, sending off letter after letter applying for a job, and you don't even get as far as an interview.

No joke, waiting for a reply to your application, when more often than not they don't even think you're worth the courtesy of a rejection letter.

If you're a young person, just out of school or college and you can't find a job, you feel a reject. If you're a family man, how can you look at yourself in the mirror in the morning if you can't even earn enough to support your young children?

In Judea, back in the first century AD, many people were unemployed. They had families to bring up, old parents to look after, but no job. And in those days no job meant no money. No job meant that your family would go hungry, perhaps even starve.

They did have what we might call a job-centre. It was the local market-place. Men looking for work would go there, stand around in the hot sun, waiting for someone – a farmer, or a builder, or a vineyard owner - to come and hire them. There was a standard rate for a day's work – a coin called a denarius. It was just enough for a man and his family to live on if they could earn a denarius a day.

It was the time of the grape harvest and everyone who went to the market place knew that workers were to be hired for the vineyard to help get in the harvest. They would stand proud and tall, praying to be hired. A contract was then entered into. The agreement was the wage for the full day. Those not hired would stand dejected, slumping their shoulders until the next landowner came along.

But this farmer returned after only three hours and offered to pay a fair wage. At noon he did the same and again at three in the afternoon when the heat of the day had passed. Then almost unbelievably he went back a last time with only one hour of daylight left. Was it because the harvest was rich and ready and had to be brought in that day? Or was it because he had compassion on the unemployed? The deals were struck and at the end of the day they all lined up.

The steward was told to make them line up in reverse – the last in, the first to receive the money. Done deliberately so that the first there could see what had happened.

When the last ones in received their money it was not for one hour's work but for a whole day. What went on in their minds? A mistake? Madness? Pay packets mixed up? Did they stand in disbelief or did they take the money and run? The next people had the same generosity shown. Perhaps by now the men who had been hired at nine in the morning or even at day break were beginning to think of bonuses. Surely that would make sense. The last to be paid, those who had worked longest and hardest received what had been agreed in the contract.

Not surprisingly as they took their money they grumbled to the employer: 'These latecomers have only done an hour's work while we have sweated all day in the blazing sun.' The owner turns and says.

'Friends I am not being unfair to you. You have the wage we agreed. Take your pay and go home. I can do what I like with my own money. I choose to be generous. Don't be jealous.'

What a hard story.

Let's think first of the men who were hired at the end of the day. Think of their despair at the thought of going home empty handed. The reality would have been of mouths to feed and not enough money to pay for basic bread and essential food. What is it like to know that your children cry with hunger? Plenty in the world know what it's like.

Some here may have known hardship in childhood. But most of us have plenty in the house. It may not be elaborate but it is there.

These men must have been overwhelmed, after being unable to get a job, to be given a whole day's pay. What pride! What gratitude they felt! Their expectation of sadness, their sense of failure turned to joy. Think of them running home and bursting in with a full day's pay! Think of their happiness of being able to fill stomachs with plain simple food and have oil in the lamp and hope and strength for the next day.

This story echoes the one of the Hebrew people in the wilderness, gasping for bread, thinking longingly of Egypt, where they weren't hungry, but they were slaves. As they continued the difficult journey from Egypt to the land of Canaan hunger got the better of them and they grumbled to Moses. How selective their memory was! They couldn't face the hardness of hunger. Then God meets their needs. Bread rained down on them, manna from heaven. Quails flew over and dropped dead at their feet. They had meat for the evening and bread for breakfast, and all given to them by the glorious free gift of God's love.

Here again we see a God whose judgment is love. A love which is unconditional.

The readings today are about the nature of God. The mystery of his dealings with us. They are about what we call grace. Pouring out so that we are loved, accepted and forgiven. It doesn't rely on us being good or coming to church or living moral lives. It comes from the heart of God to our deepest need. God's generosity is for all of us.

We are all given that abundance of love, mercy, kindness, acceptance and forgiveness that we call grace. There will be enough for the day. Enough strength, enough hope, enough courage, enough grace - for today. We can't store grace in a cupboard as we would a jar of jam or a packet of tea bags. For today there is enough. It doesn't mean that we will be magically free of trouble or sadness or anxiety or suffering. But it does mean that for today, we shall have overflowing grace.

*In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen*