+ Jesus said, ‘So the last will be first and the first will be last’.

Like the parable of the Prodigal Son, that of the labourers in the vineyard produces an immediate and uncomplicated response from all of us who hear it: that’s not fair! And that, of course, is precisely the message we are intended to take from this story. God’s kingdom functions differently from human societies, which apportion rewards accord to desert or merit. Isaiah reminded us of this truth: ‘For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor your ways my ways’, says the Lord (Is. 55: 8). Divine grace does not depend on our own virtues or our labours; it cuts through all our assumptions about privilege and earned reward by placing all humanity on an even footing. Those who, in the language of the parable, have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat (v 12) will receive the same just wage as that which God will grant to those who only arrive to work for him late in the day.

Unlike some of Jesus’ other parables, this message is directed not to the crowd, but to the inner circle of his own disciples. We need to recognise how much it therefore applies to us, as well, the members and regular worshippers in his Church. We cannot delude ourselves that because we have heard the good news of the kingdom, and because we strive to order our lives according to God’s teaching, and are accustomed to worship regularly in his temple with spiritual songs, that we have thereby secured our future reward.

Above all this parable warns against the dangers of spiritual pride. So it speaks the most directly – and powerfully – to Christian leaders, perhaps above all to the clergy. Jesus points out that, although labouring for God in the vineyard of his church may hold out the promise of an abundant reward for that faithful service, any self-conscious pride in our right to such a reward will meet with severe judgement. Whether clergy or lay, we all have to anticipate that there will be others, others who in our self-righteous eyes look entirely undeserving, who will nevertheless receive God’s abundant gift of grace. And people of this sort may well precede us, the devoutly observant and zealously industrious, into the kingdom. So of course, according to our own earthly values and standards of natural justice, we think this is not fair. We thus find ourselves tempted, like the first group of labourers hired by the landowner, to question the point of our own virtuous living and devotion, if those who arrive only at the final hour will reap the same reward as we.

Over the centuries, biblical scholars and theologians have often warned against over-interpreting parables. Every one of Jesus’ teachings in this form has one central message. Writing in the fourth century, John Chrysostom argued: ‘it is not right to enquire curiously into all things in parables word by word; but when we have learned the object for which a parable was composed, we should reap this and not busy ourselves about anything further.’ The object of this parable is completely straightforward – being encapsulated in its final, uncompromising verse. The last will become first through sheer grace, not through any works they have performed. And the first will become last because of their exaggerated sense of their
own virtue, not because there are any additional good works that they have failed to perform. Grace makes the last first; hubris pushes the first to the back of the queue. What more is there for a preacher to say?

Perhaps it might help if, Chrysostom’s advice notwithstanding, I did try to unpick a little of what we have heard, to help us to articulate why we find this abrasive story so difficult. It is not just that the image of grace that it presents is so radical; but that it appears so offensive. It would, of course, have seemed equally offensive to a Jewish audience in first-century Palestine, one used to the principle that a set amount of work would merit a specific wage.

In this context, the end of the story of Jonah that we heard as our first reading becomes directly relevant to the parable of the vineyard. Jonah, as the Sub Dean pointed out at Matins two weeks ago, shows himself at his worst in this passage: self-pitying, angry and despondent he sits under his tree sulking, because precisely the thing that he suspected would occur has indeed occurred. He preached judgement to the people of Nineveh and told them what terrible things would happen to them because of their sins, but instead of meting out the punishment that he knows they really deserved, God has gone and saved them. And Jonah is furious. This makes him look an idiot. But, more than that, it is unjust. The people of Ninevah were, in Jonah’s uncompromising view of the world, wicked. They did not deserve God’s mercy. But they have received it. And that is not fair. Jonah seems to have managed to forget how merciful God was to him when he saved him from the belly of the whale; all he can dwell on is his need for the wicked to receive their justly-merited punishment. Otherwise, who will ever listen to a prophet again?

We can readily imagine how Jonah would have responded to the story of the labourers in the vineyard. He’d have allied himself with the group who laboured all day in the hot sun, and might well have seen his role as that of a shop steward tasked with spelling out the precise nature of the workers’ grievance to the management. Since Jonah felt so strongly about the need for punishment of sins, he would have minded equally about the fair payment of wages, and willingly waved a banner proclaiming the need for a fair day’s pay for a fair day’s work.

This parable is not about the measuring out of reward according to works. In this story, Jesus offered his disciples and us a completely different doctrine of salvation: the generosity shown by the landowner has nothing to do with either the inward merit or outward achievement of any of those who worked for him. To each of these men, regardless of how long they had actually worked for him, the landowner gave the same gift of a full day’s salary. That gift of the full wage, even to those who had worked just one hour, comes simply from his generosity, the abundance of his grace.

I am struck by the cross-overs between this parable and the gospel we heard on Thursday for the feast of Matthew, Apostle and Evangelist. The story of the calling of Matthew the tax-collector hangs on the disapproval by the religious elite of Jesus’ consorting with social and moral undesirables – tax collectors and others; the passage ended with Jesus’ declaration: ‘I come not to call the righteous, but sinners’ (Matt 9: 13). This parable speaks to that same generosity of God’s; his willingness to call all into his kingdom, regardless of their deserts. It also reminds us, as I suggested earlier, of Luke’s story of the son who is accepted, welcomed back into the family by his father. Perhaps that tale might better been called that of the prodigal father; if so, today’s parable is about the prodigal employer. Both turn on the
incomprehensibility of the grace of God, the point at which today’s parable ended, with its reversal of the normal order: ‘and the last shall be first’.

This is the message that we should take away from this passage. God does not want to deal with us according to how hard we work, or how virtuous we are in his worship; he is not minded to make decisions according to how much we think we deserve his good rewards. For God understands our sinfulness, our bad decisions, our wandering from the right path; and yet, he treats us all, the sinner and the righteous, as equals. He deals with everyone according to his own abundant, unlimited grace. And that should provide genuine consolation to all of us, shaming us out of our vain attempts to measure our own righteousness against that of others.

    God of miracles and of mercy,
    All creation sings your praise.
    Like the vineyard owner,
    your grace is extravagant and unexpected.
    Lead us to repentance
    and the acceptance of your grace
    that we may witness to your love,
    which embraces both those we call friend,
    and those we call stranger. Amen