

Chalmers Church – Some of the Sunday service at Home!

Produced by Rev Robin Allison, Minister at Cockenzie and Port Seton: Chalmers Memorial Church

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Sunday 20th September 2020

Introduction

Hello and welcome to this podcast. My name is Robin Allison and I am the Minister at Cockenzie and Port Seton: Chalmers Memorial Church.

This last week, as you may know, we in Chalmers Church held our first service in our Church building for six months – a short 35 minute service held on a Wednesday afternoon in our Church hall. Although it was a very different sort of service – we couldn't sing after all and masks were worn throughout - it was still a very moving service to both lead and be at. It was good to simply be together again, something I know that many have missed above else.

Even without hymns and whilst wearing masks we discovered that it is still possible to feel a real sense of fellowship. So, I want to ask you to consider, if you didn't manage to make it along to that service and if you're free, whether you'd like to come along too. We've plenty of seats neatly and well spaced out... we're socially distancing but still welcoming... the hall is clean and tidy. More importantly it's a good opportunity to be together once more as we make preparations to begin Sunday acts of worship in the not too distant future.

So, if you want to come along – and I hope you can – simply give me a call at the Manse or drop me an email. You'll find details of how to do that in the newsletter we sent out as well as on the Church website and Facebook page.

Although we've started this short series of midweek services we continue to produce this weekly podcast and this week we take a look at a passage in the bible in which Jesus tells a parable about an employer who, at first sight, seems to have a very odd attitude as to how much his employees should be paid...

But more of that in a moment. Shall we, first of all, pray?

Let us pray...

Opening prayer and Lord's Prayer

Loving God, we rejoice this day in your faithfulness to us in these days, a faithfulness in which we rejoice as we begin the tentative process of bringing our church family back together again.

We thank you for a faithfulness that has journeyed with us and a love that has surrounded us. And we thank you that such faithfulness and love has inspired us to continue our fellowship in new ways as we seek the continued furtherance of your kingdom.

Lord, as we will be thinking about today, your kingdom seems somehow at variance with so many of the attitudes and practices in our world today. Your sense of justice is coated with compassion and your grace is freely extended to all.

We have sensed that overwhelming grace in our own lives, too, when you have extended your loving arm to us when we have struggled and gone our own way.

Forgive us, we pray, for our mixed-up attitudes which vary from one day to the next and which sway like the wind depending upon who or what we are thinking about.

Forgive us for those double standards that we can show especially in that unique ability to find that speck of dust in another's eye when there is still a log in our own eye.

Forgive us for the times when we have placed ourselves ahead of others, sometimes not even intentionally but simply because we have come to believe that we have a reserved place in the queue to your kingdom.

Grant us, therefore, not only a sense of humility but also your forgiveness. Help us to see you as the God whose grace not only overflows but which is given to all.

And receive our worship this day so that, when our worship is over, that we might have a deeper sense of your forgiving and gracious ways. These are our prayers we bring to you in the words which Jesus has taught us to say when we pray:

Our Father

who art in heaven

Hallowed be thy name

Thy kingdom come

Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread

And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors

And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil

For thine is the kingdom, and the power

and the glory, for ever, Amen.

Bible Reading – Matthew chapter 20 verses 1 to 16

Our Bible reading today is taken from the 20th Chapter of Matthew's gospel where we read verses 1 to 16. It's entitled "The parable of the workers in the Vineyard"

"For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard. 2 He agreed to pay them a denarius for the day and sent them into his vineyard.

3 'About nine in the morning he went out and saw others standing in the market-place doing nothing. 4 He told them, "You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right." 5 So they went. 'He went out again about noon and about three in the afternoon and did the same thing. 6 About five in the afternoon he went out and found still others standing around. He asked them, "Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?"

7 "Because no one has hired us," they answered.

'He said to them, "You also go and work in my vineyard."

8 *'When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, "Call the workers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and going on to the first."*

9 *'The workers who were hired about five in the afternoon came and each received a denarius. 10 So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius. 11 When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner. 12 "These who were hired last worked only one hour," they said, "and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day."*

13 *'But he answered one of them, "I am not being unfair to you, friend. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius? 14 Take your pay and go. I want to give the one who was hired last the same as I gave you. 15 Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?"*

16 *'So the last will be first, and the first will be last.*

Amen and thanks be to God for this reading of His Holy Word and to his name be the praise and the glory.

Reflection

1979 was not a bad year for film releases at all. The highest grossing film of the year was Dustin Hoffman's and Meryl Streep's "*Kramer versus Kramer*". It took in \$106 million at the box office alone. It was also the year that the first of the Star Trek movies came out – the fifth most popular film of the year. In the same year Roger Moore starred as James Bond in the film "*Moonraker*" where Bond stops an evil genius from destroying planet earth from Space. And at number 10 in the box office takings that year was the original "*Muppet Movie*". Even that took in \$65 million...

I only mention these statistics and film titles by way of contrast to a still little known film that was also released in 1979 by the film director Bill Forsyth. It's called "*That sinking feeling*". It's a film I have loved to watch over the years, mainly because its set in Glasgow and was made with almost no budget whatsoever! I also love it because I was at one of very first showings of the film at the Edinburgh Film Theatre on Lothian Road.

Forsyth directed the film a couple of years before he made the perhaps better known film "*Gregory's girl*". He didn't have much of a budget for that film, but he had almost no budget at all for "*That sinking feeling*" in which the lead parts were all played by young folk involved in the then Glasgow Youth Theatre.

They didn't, as far as I know, even get paid as such for the parts they played but the performance they turn in was still fantastic. In it they played a group of unemployed teenagers living in a run down area of Glasgow. They have their dreams, sure enough... to be rich... to be successful enough to actually be able to afford a burger and coffee from a roadside van... to make it big in the music industry...

Instead, in one of the early scenes in the film we find them sitting in a car in the middle of a derelict building site bemoaning the injustices of life... an injustice epitomised when the camera pans away from the car and we discover the vehicle they are sitting in has no wheels on it. It just about says it all – no jobs... not even some wheels on the car... and, as far as they are concerned, not much of a future either...

The solution they come up with to their dilemma is to stage a robbery in the local stainless steel sink factory before dividing their spoils...

There's not much more to the plot than that, folks, but the film holds you in its grip... a story of young folk living with a real sense of injustice and, if you lived in certain parts of Glasgow at that time you'd have been able to see it at first hand.

At a time when many of the old tenements were being torn down and replaced with new housing the unemployment level was also steadily rising. It was easy for folk to feel left behind. Young folk found it hard to get on training schemes and those who lost their jobs after years of work – well some of them never got another job again.

Glasgow was, of course, well known in the past for the way in many of the big industrial companies – heavy engineering and shipyards - once employed their workers. Often it was on short term contracts with men especially simply standing at the gates of the factories and shipyards in the hope that someone would come out and give them some work to do. We can see where the seeds of that feeling of injustice are sown for these were proud people who wanted to work. It was built into their DNA.

When I read the parable that Jesus tells about the workers in the vineyards, I am reminded of some of these sorts of stories of the way people used to live and to find jobs. After all, the whole premise of our parable today from Matthew Chapter 20 and verses 1 to 16 is built upon a landowner going out in the early morning to find some people who will help him empty the vines in his vineyard of their fruit.

The men standing in the town square waiting for some work to do are just as vulnerable as those who stood at the gates of the Glasgow engineering companies in the not too distant past. These were clearly people who didn't have much to fall back upon. When they didn't earn, they didn't eat. As straightforward as that.

Perhaps word had got out that the vineyard was just about ready for harvesting. And they would have known, as the vineyard owner did too, that once the grapes were ready for picking that there was a relatively small window of opportunity to harvest them in. Take them too early and they did not produce good wine. Harvest them too late and they were worth nothing... a years' worth of grape growing gone to waste.

How, therefore, does the vineyard owner get enough employees to bring the harvest in? Well, probably from the same place that he got them every year he needed help, from the one place where there were always people looking for work – at the gathering places in the town square.

And that is exactly what he does offering a Denarius for their labours – an average day's wage - for what would probably be at least a 12 hour shift that ran from 6am till 6pm.

Jesus then goes onto explain that the same vineyard owner goes out again at various intervals during the day – at 9am... at noon, at 3pm and again at 5pm (an hour before the shift finishes) so that he can employ more and more people to get the work done.

It's only when these workers are being paid that they realise that their employer had decided that everyone – regardless of how many hours they had worked – would be paid the same wage... a denarius, a day's wage.

In so doing his actions begin to create a real sense of resentment when those who had toiled all day long realised that, in their eyes, they had been unjustly treated.

And we, from a distance to their situation, can probably sense the injustice they feel and why they would have felt it for if it had been you and me in that situation we'd probably have said

the same. Perhaps we have... Perhaps the very same words have crossed our lips before – *“It’s an injustice”*

Maybe when we’ve seen how someone seems better off for doing less than we did... or when we hear of some of the sums of money that pass hands in the world of business to advisors and part time board members...

None of us likes to think that we’ve been taken for a fool... had our contribution overlooked and one way that we can assess how our worth is being looked at is in the bottom line of how much someone actually paid us for the job that we did.

The great American preacher Barbara Brown Taylor sets the scenario in a different context, one taken from her childhood. Here’s what she writes: *“I remember waiting in line for the Saturday afternoon matinee at the local movie theatre when I was a little girl. It was summertime, and there were always lots of us there. Our parents would drop us off in the heat of the afternoon, giddy at the prospect of a couple hours’ peace and quiet. We stood in the shade of the awning outside and waited for the box office to open, our dollar bills burning holes in our pockets. . .*

Where every one of us wanted to be was right up there at the front of the line. That was the best place to be, not only because you were the first inside, but because you were there when the moment came, when the doors were unlocked and the timid-looking manager pushed them open, so that a great wave of cold air rolled out of the dark theatre and hit you like a blast from the arctic. That was the moment everyone waited for, and those who had won places at the front of the line got the very best of it.

I cannot imagine anything more disheartening (she concludes) than if the manager had come outside and reversed the order, telling those of us at the front of the line to stay put, while he invited those at the end of the line — those who had just arrived, those who were not even hot yet from standing in the sun — to enter the theatre first. I think I would have cried; I certainly would have booed, because it would not have been fair”. (Ed. Thomas Long, “A Chorus of Witnesses 1994)

I think we’ve all been there, folks... and being passed over for someone further down the queue can leave you feeling dispirited and disillusioned. It was the somewhat controversial American comedian, George Carlin, who once said, *“The caterpillar does all the work but it’s the butterfly that gets all the publicity”*... and we’ve all been caterpillars at one point or more in our lives who’ve lost their place in the queue because someone noticed the butterfly first!

It’s at this point that the preacher Barbara Brown Taylor turns the whole point here upside down. Here we are worrying and building up our frustrations... exercising our injustice muscles again and yet, as she points out – in what is Brown Taylor’s often unique way – is the truth (and I quote) that *““God isn’t fair; God is generous.”* Let me say that again - *“God isn’t fair; God is generous.”*

If he were fair and we were his employees he’d have had us into the office for a talking too by now... But since we’re not his employees and God’s not our Boss (at least not in the conventional sense) we have to start thinking of God’s Kingdom in a whole new way... in a way where God’s generosity outweighs even his fairness.

Generous – that’s just the way God is!

Let us pray.

Closing Prayer

Generous God, who would have thought that one day we would come to the conclusion that we do not love you because you are fair but because you are generous. But we do rejoice that you are generous, more than you are fair because speaking of you as fair implies that justice and equity are at the forefront of your thinking when we know that it is your generosity that drives you.

It was generosity that led you to sending your Son Jesus into the world, one who lived a life where he did not demand that people signed on the dotted line and familiarised themselves with the rulebook but who called people out of love... out of care... out of a generous heart.

We pray this day for those who could do with that message of divine generosity in their lives – especially those who spend their days as so called caterpillars being overlooked by others who are more keen to see the butterflies... those who feel that they are not recognised for who they are or valued as they should be.

We pray for those who employ other folk in the workplace too that they too may be generous and understanding, especially in days such as we are living through now where establishing normal work patterns are far from easy.

And we pray, as we close this time of worship for those who give generously to others – for those who care, for those who heal, for those who teach and for those who listen, wherever they exercise that gift of generosity.

Bless each of us this day with your generous blessing as we bring you these our prayers in Jesus' name, Amen.

Benediction

Go out into the world as workers in God's upside-down kingdom, where the last are first and the first are last, where needs are met in miraculous ways, and there is grace enough for all!

And may the blessing of God, the love of Jesus Christ, and the presence of the Holy Spirit surround you and sustain you in the coming days. Amen.