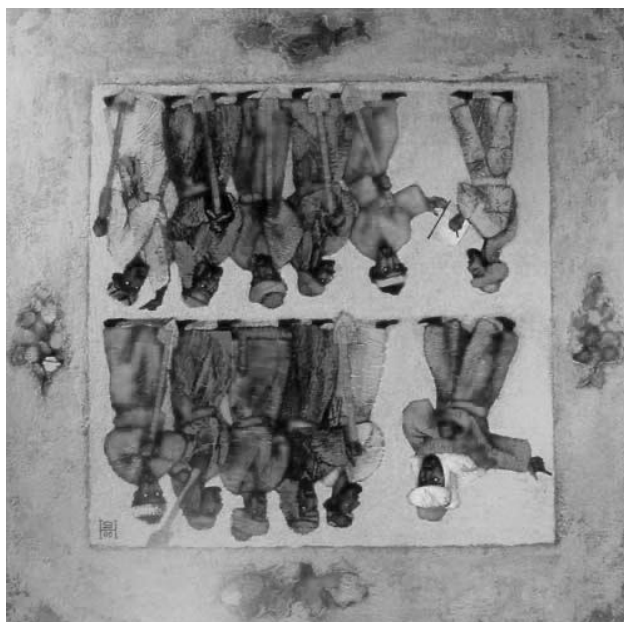


Tamworth City Uniting Church

Worship on 20th September 2020



Turning Things Upside Down

Acknowledgement of Country

As you enter this time of worship please acknowledge the custodianship of this land by the Gamilaroi peoples - the traditional owners of this land, and pay respect to their elders – past, present and emerging.

Call to Worship

The work of the Creator is visible
Let us respond with praise.

The example of Jesus is apparent
Let us respond with obedience.

The wind of the Spirit is blowing
Let us respond with joy.

The word of God is calling
Let us worship in spirit and in truth.

Song *Praise the God who changes places*

Praise the God who changes places, leaves the lofty seat,
welcomes us with warm embraces, stoops to wash our feet.

*Friends, be strong! Hold your heads high!
Freedom is our song! Alleluia!*

Praise the rabbi, speaking, doing all that God intends,
dying, rising, faith renewing, calling us his friends.

Refrain

Praise the Breath of Love, whose freedom spreads our waking wings,
lifting every blight and burden till the spirit sings;

Refrain

Praise, until we join the singing far beyond our sight,
with the Ending-and-Beginning, dancing in the light.

Refrain

TiS 178 Brian A Wren. Copied under CCLI Worship Licence No 604439

For Reflection

Take a moment to think about how you reacted to the picture at the top of the page:

Did you react?

Were you surprised?

Did you think someone had made a mistake?

What else?

Silence

The Gospel reading today speaks about God turning things upside down:
where the 'first shall be last, and the last shall be first'.

It talks about God's abundant grace – a grace that can't be earned.

What does God's grace mean for you?

Silence

Prayers

In faith, let us come before God, so we may know who we are:

(Silence)

We are the people of the New Heaven and the New Earth,
but so often we fall far short of that hope.

(Silence)

We are the people who receive the grace of God,
but so often we fail to offer it to others.

(Silence)

Generous, open-hearted God, we ask your forgiveness, knowing that in your abundant mercy
you do indeed forgive us. Through your Spirit, may our lives be turned around so that we
might live fully and well. We pray in and through the name of Christ. Amen.

Song *Help us, O Lord, to learn*

Help us, O Lord, to learn the truths your word imparts:
to study that your laws may be inscribed upon our hearts.

Help us, O Lord, to live the faith which we proclaim,
that all our thoughts and words and deeds may glorify your name.

Help us, O Lord, to teach the beauty of your ways,
that all who seek may find the Christ, and live a life of praise.

TiS 428 William Watkins Reid. Copied under CCLI Worship Licence No. 604439

Reading *Matthew 20:1-16*

“For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. ² After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. ³ When he went out about nine o’clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; ⁴ and he said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.’ So they went. ⁵ When he went out again about noon and about three o’clock, he did the same. ⁶ And about five o’clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, ‘Why are you standing here idle all day?’ ⁷ They said to him, ‘Because no one has hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard.’ ⁸ When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, ‘Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.’ ⁹ When those hired about five o’clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. ¹⁰ Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. ¹¹ And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, ¹² saying, ‘These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.’ ¹³ But he replied to one of them, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? ¹⁴ Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. ¹⁵ Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?’ ¹⁶ So the last will be first, and the first will be last.”



Message

In this parable we have, like most good stories, a story that speaks for itself. It could be just read and then sat with for a while as we think about our reactions to what it is saying. I was tempted to just read it and let you sit and think for yourself about how you react to it.

But there are a few things that I think need emphasising.

Firstly, the audience to whom Jesus is speaking is primarily made up of his disciples. This passage is a part of their instruction as they, and Jesus, move from Galilee to Jerusalem.

The parable is not, in the first instance addressed to the crowds or even to those who are seeking, but to insiders - those who know, at least in some part, about divine grace.

Secondly, the story is bracketed by two sayings. Sayings that are known as reversal sayings. 'The first shall be last and the last shall be first. These sayings, in themselves, carry enormous threat for people who identify themselves as insiders - as those who enjoy a special place with Jesus. The parable in effect, depicts what it means to say the 'first shall be last and the last first'.

When we talk about God's grace, I wonder what immediately springs to mind for us? Is it God's goodness to us despite what we do? Is it God's overflowing generosity? Is it something that we earn? Do we think we have to notch up a certain number of hours being good or we have to spend a certain number of hours working for 'the church' or 'the community'?

This parable I believe, talks about a grace that is radical and offensive in its character. This radicalness and offensiveness is evident in the two sets of relationships that the story talks about.

Firstly, there is the relationship between the owner of the vineyard and the labourers who work all day.

The story leaves us with a final scene in which the labourers who work the entire day stand by and watch as the manager – on the instructions of the landowner, pays the other labourers a full day's wage. The first group's anticipation of a bigger wage mounts as they see the generosity shown to the others. When they receive only the agreed upon wages they – perhaps very understandably, grumble against the landowner. I don't think there are too many of us who like seeing people getting the same amount of recompense or thanks for doing less than us!

The apparent unfairness of the owner needs to be looked at a bit more deeply.

Imagine what would happen if the world really functioned in this way! What if the 'equal pay for equal work' principle which in Australia at least, is fairly entrenched, didn't operate? We can imagine what might happen. People would sleep in late – coming to work in the late afternoon if they knew they would get paid for the whole day!

The landowner's action upsets the whole arrangement of work order and ethics which, in itself, is not an evil arrangement since it institutionalises an important principle of justice.

But! This parable tells us that divine grace does not rest on a merit system. And because it doesn't, we insiders are often prone to grumble.

Who can blame us for wondering whether God's grace does not undermine the whole reason for being good, for observing standards, for keeping rules, for living justly.

We might ask ourselves: Do we fully understand a God who goes against all the rules and equalises things out like this.

Perhaps we could support the owner's generosity if the groups of workers who had come later had been delayed through no fault of their own. But the owner's actions are not the sign of a little generosity to an unfortunate few. They call for a totally different way of viewing God. A way which does not conform to the standards that we set ourselves.

But the second set of relationships in the parable gets us even deeper into the offensive character of grace – and that is the relationship between the labourers who work all day and the labourers who come late.

The former group express their gripe by saying, 'These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us!' They are envious of the generosity shown the others. Had they been the recipients of the owner's gracious method of bookkeeping, they would have been overjoyed. What they can't stand is the generosity that puts these latecomers on a par with them. The grumblers are not really against grace they are against grace shown to others and all that that implies.

It's an old story.

Jonah sat on the brow of the hill outside Nineveh and pouted when God spared the city.

The elder brother in the story of the Prodigal Son, thought his father a doting old fool when his father invited him to join the celebrations of his brother's return. His words – 'I stayed with you and worked for you and you haven't celebrated my faithfulness' speak of someone who can't comprehend real grace.

The Pharisee at prayer thanks God that he is not like the sinful publican.

Divine grace is a great equalizer, which rips away presumed privilege and puts all recipients on a par. And that's hard to stomach when we work under the merit system and want to see some reward for our labours. It's hard to stomach when we discover that those guilty of wrongs are brothers and sisters to whom divine generosity has been shown.

God's grace is not some sentimental thing that applies only to those who are good, or whom we think have earned it. It is abrasive, radical and at times offensive to us. It is something that far outreaches our wildest imaginings.

Affirmation of Faith

I believe in God the Creator who fills the world with light,
rainbow colours, and shapes beyond imagining.

A Lover who gives us grace upon grace,
not asking for anything in return
but just giving, so that we might reach our full potential.

I believe in Jesus – God's son and our brother,
who came and turned people's way of thinking upside down,
A person for whom sinners came ahead of the well-established;
for whom losers were first, rather than last.
A person who put people's wellbeing ahead of rules and regulations.

I believe in God's Spirit.
A Spirit that lives within us and around us.
A Spirit that encourages, nourishes, confronts and challenges us
as we seek to follow the way of Jesus.

I believe in God:
Creator, Brother and Life-Giver.

Betty Stroud

Prayers of the People

(Prepared by Norm Dezius)

Dear Lord, as we meditate today on your people in this world and here in Tamworth we thirst for God's grace to turn things upside down and make situations throughout the world return to the way it was.

However, Lord, we know in our heart that things will not return to the way they were. You have a purpose for us. We know you are bighearted with no limitations: you over give and overpay, handing us not only the rewards due us, but heaping on us the fortunes of everlasting life and love.

Lord, we pray today for you to pour you abundant generosity and healing to hose in the world suffering from the ravages of the COVID-19 Virus. This scourge, that has split so many families across the globe and right here in our states and territories. We know you have a plan for your world and we pray that you provide those who are not taking this pandemic seriously with greater wisdom, allowing us to understand that we all handle the frustrations

differently: some deny, some lash out, some hoard, and we that that many of us turn to you
for your love, encouragement and direction in this time.

Lord, be with our leaders, for those wishing to capitalise on the situation and politicise the
pandemic: calm them, settle them breathe the Holy Spirit into them, to allow them to
continue to lead in a positive, caring, purposeful way.

We pray for parents and grandparents in this time: allow them to be generous in their love and
have the energy and clarity of mind to calm their children and speak words of encouragement
to them about the future, and the love that you, Lord, will provide to their children as they
progress through the world.

Lord, for the health care workers, we give you praise for keeping them going! Please Lord,
keep them safe. Keep them healthy, so that they can continue caring for the sick. We ask that
you protect all health care workers – we need them to be healthy and available. We know that
you are the great physician. You are the generous healer. We ask that you would put your
healing hand on the patients. We ask that you would work through the health care workers to
give patients the best care possible.

Father God, you are our provider. Everything we have comes from you. But right now, many
who have lost their jobs feel like everything is being taken from them. Please be with them.

As our reading from Matthew shows us, you will be generous with those who suffer. Lead
thes people to use this time to help them learn new things about future work, each other, about
themselves and about your love and generosity.

Finally Lord, we pray for our church family and the future directions you would have us take,
and how we can best generously spread your word and love throughout our community here
in Tamworth.

We ask all these things in Jesus' name and pray in the words he taught us:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be your name.

Your kingdom come, your will be done – on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread,

and forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us

Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil.

For the kingdom, and the power, and the glory are yours
now and forever and ever. Amen.

Song *Where cross the crowded ways of life*

Where cross the crowded ways of life, where sound the cries of race and clan,
above the noise of selfish strife we hear your voice, O Son of Man.

In haunts of wretchedness and need, on shadowed thresholds dark with fears,
from paths where hide the lures of greed we catch the vision of your tears.

From tender childhood's helplessness, from human grief and burdened toil
from famished souls, from sorrow's stress your heart has never known recoil.

The cup of water given for you still holds the freshness of your grace;
yet long these multitudes to see the sweet compassion of your face.

O Master, from the mountain side make haste to heal these hearts of pain;
among these restless throngs abide, and tread the city's streets again:

till all the world shall learn your love and follow where your feet have trod,
till glorious from your heaven above shall come the city of our God.

Sending Out

God shows us abundant generosity and grace

We will live that abundance and generosity.

God, through Christ, walks with us

We will walk alongside those who are hurting.

God through the Spirit, gives us encouragement and hope

We will live as people of hope.

Blessing

Go forth into the world to live as God's people,
and may the blessing of God: Creator, Son and Spirit,
be with you this day and in the days to come.

Amen!