

HYMNS:	21	“Born in song!”
	518	“Father, hear the prayer we offer”
	696	“For the healing of the nations”
	705	“It is God who holds the nations in the hollow of his hand”

READINGS: Philippians 1: 20-30
Matthew 20: 1-16

“WHAT SORT OF JUSTICE IS THIS?”

Residents of this Borough may know that the Police Station for Islington is in Tolpuddle Street. Some people laugh when they hear that name – it sounds as if it comes from some children’s TV programme. It certainly sounds a bit of a joke name. But, in fact, this is a very serious name that marks a very serious historical event. It was from this place that thousands of people marched on Westminster in the early 1830s to demand the pardon for 6 men who had been transported to Australia for banding together to demand a living wage for agricultural labourers in Dorset. Those men came from the village of Tolpuddle and became known as the Tolpuddle martyrs – five of the six were Methodists and one, George Loveless was a Local Preacher.

What did these men do that they were sentenced to transportation to Australia for seven years? They were not pleading for increased wages – although they were living on the breadline. They actually banded together to try to prevent their employers – the landed gentry of Dorset from reducing their wages from 9/- old shillings to 6/- old shillings per week. Yes, times were tough for the whole country. There had been a war with France and crop prices were low but these men and their families could just not survive on only 6/- shillings per week.

These Tolpuddle men formed a Friendly Society of Agricultural Labourers to plead their cause and show that they were united. Their actions marked the beginning of the modern Trade Union movement. Such Societies or Unions were not illegal but these men had asked members to take an oath of loyalty and there were old laws against the taking of oaths. The landowners used this law to get rid of these troublesome farmworkers. So, in March 1834 these men were sentenced to transportation to Australia for seven years.

When this became more widely known, there was an outcry against their treatment. Marches, like the one from Tolpuddle Street were organised and in the end, the six were allowed to return as free men.

Each year in July, Trade Union members, politicians and members of the public descend on the tiny village of Tolpuddle in celebration of the efforts of these six brave men who stood up for basic rights for farm workers and a service is held in the small

Methodist Chapel which nurtured them This year, in July, Rachel Lampard, last year's Vice President and daughter of Judith and John, spoke at the celebration and laid a wreath. The link with Methodism still continues!

Now I have one big question. When George Loveless, the Tolpuddle Martyr who was a Local Preacher, had to preach on the passage from Matthew that we have heard today – how did he approach this passage?

He did not leave his preaching notes for us to study, unfortunately, so we shall never know how he tackled this passage in his preaching but I think we can assume that he knew his Bible well and read this passage from Matthew in context. So let us look again at this passage and its context within Matthew's Gospel.

This passage, usually known as the Workers in the Vineyard, is a parable that Jesus told. Jesus, like other Rabbis, used parable to great effect. Parables are stories designed to grip the hearers because they put together the commonplace with the heavenly and tease people to think through what they mean. Parables are memorable, provocative, challenging stories where the listeners are left to work through the implications. What an amazing parable this one of the Workers in the Vineyard is because it is still challenging people and throwing up different interpretations 2000 years down the line.

George Loveless knew about parable – you can be sure of that – especially ones that used an agricultural background. Surely George Loveless did not miss the opening words of this parable – 'The Kingdom of heaven is like a landowner.....' This passage is primarily about the new kingdom that Jesus was inaugurating.

So this parable is about the kingdom of heaven. It is not a blueprint for labour practices or economic systems any more than the Prodigal Son is a parable about parenting or the Great Banquet a manual on table etiquette.

Any employer or company that paid people who worked for one hour a day the same as it paid those who had worked all day would soon have a hard time finding employees willing to turn up at the beginning of the day – not to speak of falling foul of a whole swathe of labour regulations.

So it bears restating that this is a parable and like all Jesus' parables it is meant to get us to think critically about the world we have constructed, to free us from our cultural shackles and self-deception and enable us to discern more clearly how God works in the world.

'The Kingdom of heaven is like a landowner...' This parable comes after a dialogue between Jesus and his disciples and between Jesus and Peter in particular, where Peter exclaimed that he and the other disciples had left everything to follow Jesus. 'What was going to be their reward?' he asked. In this parable the answer is there – namely that the values that underpin that question are quite at variance with the

values of the Kingdom of heaven. Those considered first by worldly standards will be last and vice versa. In other words Peter's question is completely the wrong place to begin. But that is not the only possible level or meaning. Matthew is the only Gospel which records this parable and Matthew wrote against a particular background – he was concerned about the unity of the followers of Jesus in communities where there were both Jewish and Gentile believers. These communities were quite fragile. There were Jews who thought that Gentile believers had to follow the rituals of Judaism before they could become fully followers of Jesus.

So for those with ears to hear, Matthew's rendering of this parable sought to challenge the grudging attitude of Jewish believers who felt that they had to live by the Law of Moses while Gentiles were swarming into the community of Jesus, late in the day, without having to shoulder the burdens of the Law. Was there even an underlying assumption among some Jewish believers that Gentiles didn't deserve such grace from God. Whatever else our parable says, it shows a landowner/God seeking out his people all the time and offering each the same gift of grace, the same level of welcome.

Here, of course, is also a message for each Christian community – a message that God is always out in the marketplace seeking those who will respond to his invitation. Just as those who worked in the vineyard were treated the same as those who had worked all day so we have to come to terms with the fact that our God welcomes and embraces the very newest member just as fully and wholeheartedly as those who have been Christians and worked for the Church all their life.

This is God's economy – a very different economy from the economies of our world. Let us face it we can be just as fed up with God's attitude as those day-long workers were with the generosity of the landowner.

What we have to come to terms with, what those first disciples had to come to terms with is that God does not give to us according to what we deserve. If God did so, we would all be in a pretty sorry state.

Not one of us deserves God's love. If heaven were about just desert and fairness, heaven would be empty!

This parable challenges us to see that God turns human notions of fairness and rights upside down. This is a parable that should really be called. The Generous Landowner rather than the Workers in the Vineyard. This is a parable about the wonderful nature of God – compassionate, generous, loving and generous – beyond our wildest imaginings. There is about God's grace a radical, uncontrollable nature which comes close to being beyond what we can cope with.

For if God can be that radically generous so we are called to be also!

And that takes us back to the details of this parable – the nitty gritty of employment practice and reward. The parable, although about the kingdom of heaven, works on our imagination in ways that have profound implications for the market place and economic justice.

George Loveless knew from his reading of the Bible that it could not be right for workers to be exploited, manipulated and forced to work for a pittance that could never cover their basic needs. Nearly 200 years on as we look at the economic system around us, we do not have to look far to see similar travesties of justice as those meted out on the Tolpuddle Martyrs – trafficked people, zero hours contracts, jobs without any rights or protections. Is that not what the whole Uber debacle is all about?

Our God is a generous God who loves all his children equally and that should be good news for everyone – so let us play our part in assuring that that is the case.
Amen