

The kingdom is like...

When a 'Jesus story' opens with the words "The kingdom of heaven is like..." we should pay very close attention. You see, Jesus is not the one who gives us the (so called) standard image of heaven – city of gold, pearly gates, choirs offering endless praise, and stuff like that. John dreamed that up in a cave on Patmos, and the emerging Christian church chose to place his vision at the end of what would become Holy Scripture.

No, when Jesus talks about the kingdom of heaven, the reign of God, the hope for the brighter future is always placed in terms that are current and real and which challenge the listeners understanding of the 'here and now' as a possible location for this glorious idea. So (in Matthew's gospel today) the 'kingdom of heaven is like a guy who needs workers for the farm.

The local employment office (aka – the town square) has some early birds, whom the farmer puts straight to work at minimum wage. Still, it's a job, and off they go with... let's call it gratitude. So the 'early bird gets the worm' and all that, but clearly there's more work to be done – the farmer makes regular trips to the job bank, and hires more people every time...right up to the tail-end of the working day, when he hires those whom no one else would hire.

Let's stop there for a minute. What do you make of this? "Why aren't you working?" asks the land owner. "Because no one has hired us..."

Simple question – obvious answer, but there's no recrimination; no hint that they 'should have been more diligent', or earlier on the spot – our man simply says, 'get over to my place and get to work.'

What manner of farmer – what kind of business person – what sort of KINGDOM does this sound like so far?

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First, it is not a kingdom where all employment problems are solved. These stragglers are deemed 'unemployable' by the rest of the market (this suggests that there is still some inequity / some difference of opinion around diligence and the application of self to a chosen task etc.) Second, it is a kingdom of opportunities that defy expectation.

By 5 o'clock, most might despair of earning their crust for that day, but what are you going to do – go home empty handed? Better to persist, and hope for a little. It may be the best one can hope for; defeat, but with a kind of (self-possessed) dignity.

But of course, while the kingdom has all manner of people in it, the tone of the kingdom is set by the one who continues to search for those who need 'work', and who treats every single one of the workers in exactly the same manner. Now, here is where this parable rubs up against our modern sense of 'right and wrong.' We are inclined to sympathy for those who complain that they 'deserve more' than those hired late in the day. There is plenty here to set us at odds with the text, to bring suspicion on Jesus as a promoter of communist or socialist tendencies:

What do you mean everyone earns the same, regardless their effort, ingenuity or application? No overtime? No 'fringe benefits'? No consideration for our day spent in the sweltering heat? No way to differentiate between those who WANT to work, and those who are only half-hearted in the attempt? How will we measure success? How will we 'order' our society? How will we know who to shame/blame for the 'state of the economy...' What kind of society IS this???

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Sorry, did that strike a nerve? Have you engaged in those kinds of conversations recently? Heard a debate over the usefulness of CERB<sup>1</sup> or other government funded aid packages? Better yet, do you know anyone didn't qualify or whose situation left them unable to access help – either recently or ever? Do you have direct experience with being among the '5 o'clock crowd' in today's context...?

This parable still convicts us in our approach to the things we value as a society. Jesus parable continues to ask questions about the way we organize and distribute social programs in the here and now. And strangely it is the folks that don't need such social programs who often raise the strongest objections to them.

None of this is unique to our current conundrum. Western society has been organized along economic lines for hundreds of years, and the gap between top and bottom grows greater every year. The rules are made by those who control the purse strings, and only reluctantly does the big wage earner share the wealth in a way that is meaningful. Usually it is governments that are left to find ways to level the playing field, so again I ask – what kind of kingdom does Jesus hold out to us?

I'm suggesting that Jesus 'ideal' is radically different than the world we inhabit. In the Divine ideal there is justice and equity without explanation – and the one in charge of *this* kingdom is generous beyond all imagining.

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<sup>1</sup> Canadian Emergency Relief Benefit – offered through the COVID-19 Pandemic from March 2020

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The model that suggests that ‘the boss’ will ensure that every one of the workers is adequately and appropriately ‘paid’ (*that’s the suggestion – that the day’s wage would provide the necessities of life for the worker and his family*<sup>2</sup>) is supposed to be radical! In the promised commonwealth of God, all have enough (and indeed more than enough) and there is no need for the inhabitants of this ‘commonwealth’ to arrange themselves by tax bracket.

So when you hear uproar at the next government suggestion that support will be offered, or that billions will be spent to ensure those hardest hit have at least a fighting chance to survive the winter – or when someone raises the spectre of ‘creeping communism’ at the mention of a basic universal income, I beg you to think of this parable; to remember that the ideal presented by Jesus, while seemingly a long way off, depends entirely on the generosity of those who can afford to be generous. That we imagine only God has sufficient resources to solve every social problem is to misunderstand the premise of the parable.

The kingdom of heaven is reflected best by our desire to be dramatically generous – to demand that the vast resources of Creation bring equal benefit to all. For Jesus also suggested that this kingdom of ridiculous generosity was near to us – within our grasp; and that means it’s possible for us to bring it into being.

With the Spirit’s help, let it soon be so. Amen

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<sup>2</sup> Anchor Bible – Matthew: notes on chapter 20 pg 237 Doubleday & Co, Garden City NY. 1971