

20th September 2020 6pm The Last will be First

Bible readings by Emma Latham and Rosie Lee, Sermon by Robert Latham

This transcript is only of the notices, readings and sermon.

Notices

[Robert Latham:]

It's a notice that we're giving on behalf of the Parochial Church Council. There is to be an Annual Parochial Meeting on the 19th of October. If you'd like to take part in that, you'll need to be on the electoral roll. If you're not already, therefore you need to contact Kevin Broadbent, or Denise in the office. We are apparently looking for people to offer their services as churchwardens, as PCC members and as Deanery Synod members, so if you are being encouraged in any of those directions, then please do offer, and maybe talk to somebody who's got some experience in those jobs already. Thank you.

First Reading: Philippians 1:21-30

[Emma Latham:]

²¹ For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. ²² If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labour for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! ²³ I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; ²⁴ but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body. ²⁵ Convinced of this, I know that I will remain, and I will continue with all of you for your progress and joy in the faith, ²⁶ so that through my being with you again your boasting in Christ Jesus will abound on account of me.

²⁷ Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. Then, whether I come and see you or only hear about you in my absence, I will know that you stand firm in the one Spirit, contending as one man for the faith of the gospel ²⁸ without being frightened in any way by those who oppose you. This is a sign to them that they will be destroyed, but that you will be saved – and that by God. ²⁹ For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe in him, but also to suffer for him, ³⁰ since you are going through the same struggle you saw I had, and now hear that I still have.

This is the word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

Second Reading: Matthew 20:1-16 [NIVUK 2011]

[Rosie Lee:]

¹ '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.'

This is the word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

Sermon

[Robert Latham:]

Shall we pray.

May I speak in the name of God, who His Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
Amen.

There's a text from the first chapter of Philippians, a little bit before¹ what Emma read for us, which is where Paul talks about that he knows that the good work that God begun in us will be complete for the day of Christ Jesus. And I just think that's a great comforting thing. And the connection with it? You'll see how it connects with the reading in a moment, but I just want to tell you about a lady called Margaret, who I knew when I was a young priest. Margaret was an elderly lady and I was running at the time a church plant in a place called Worsley. And Margaret went to the eight o'clock community service in the parish church, though she lived in my patch. And she hadn't been ever so well. For some reason I was encouraged to go and pop and see how things were. And that was the beginning of an interesting journey for both me, but particularly for Margaret. Margaret was a retired nurse. She'd had many, many years serving community. I believe she'd risen fairly high up in the hierarchy of things, but the details now I can't be certain of, and had given many, many years to nursing and caring for people. And she was a faithful, committed Christian who said her prayers, believed devoutly. But she had one uncertainty. She was getting quite old and I think she was well into her eighties. And she was uncertain about what would happen when she died. In fact it was quite frightening her. And I recall I had the privilege of just praying with Margaret in order for her to receive God's Holy Spirit, and to receive the peace of God in her heart, that meant all that fear of death and dying was taken away. And she became quite placid about the whole affair and indeed began, some Sundays, to come and join us at the church plant and enjoyed those services, though they weren't quite what she was used to. Some time later Margaret had a fall. There was an underlying issue which would have caused her death anyway, but this fall really brought her to the brink of death, and I was again called into a hospital to actually pray with her just before she died. Margaret was peaceful and calm. And after prayers I remember staying with the family until she drew her last breath, quietly going

1 Verse 6

to her Maker and to the Lord who had redeemed her. It stands out in my mind. And I really don't want it to come over to you in any sense of being morbid or sad, because in many, many ways, I'm sure her family was sad when she died, and that's right and true and they mourned appropriately, in the context of the funeral. But the way Margaret died brought joy to my heart because in it, I saw something very peaceful, something very loving, and the power of God drawing Margaret to Himself and enfolding her in His love.

I don't know whether you've ever noticed but when I think of some fairly elderly people who I know have been praying people, are praying people down their long years of their lives, and people like Margaret, you suddenly realise the truth that the psalmist says, "In the midst of death we are in life." There's something strange about faithful people coming close to their death in this earthly life, which is quite marvellous.

There are two people I'm thinking of. One was a former vicar, the vicar of Emma's parish when she and I got married. I remember meeting him some years ago, probably when he was in his mid-70s, and he looked radiant. In fact, as he came to talk to us, and we were still in a bit of a conversation with somebody else, I kept looking at him and looking at him and said to him, you look really, really well - but it wasn't just he looked well, he was radiant! He shone! And there's something really, really wonderful about that. And I think it just blesses my heart, and I commend this thought to you, that when you see this in another person, there is a real sense that life outshines their imminent death, but there is not so much a tragic truncation of what we have already, but it's almost like they have a bridge into something eternal, which all they have to do is walk across and accept that they are then in the fullness of the place where Jesus reigns, and our Father God is on the throne.

I think there's something about this that Paul is referring to in our reading from Philippians. He says, tells us, he doesn't really quite know what he'd rather do - to go to be with the Lord, and so enjoy the eternal splendours of Heaven, or actually to continue on in the flesh, in life here in Earth, and visit the people of Philippi. You can really feel there's a kind of stirring of both things in his heart, that he really would have liked to have done both, if it were possible. But it seems to me that the further aspect that is here is that Paul was really content to do what God the Father thought best for the proclamation of the Gospel in and through Paul, and to the Philippians and any others, perhaps, who were being lined up for a visit from Paul.

Of course this time we know that Paul was in prison and the likelihood of him being able to go out and visit these people is not certain. It may well have been possible, we know that Paul once he was in prison, he didn't actually stay there, he came in and out for a bit until he finally was taken and executed by the Emperor Nero. I just think that that's a wonderful thought, that you get to a place in life where you have as much joy looking back and connecting with the people who are around you as you have looking forward to that face-to-face encounter with the living God, whose faith you have nurtured in your heart, and have it as a desired outcome.

Of course Paul's motivation for this is he wants to encourage the people of Philippi to even more greater endeavours in the Gospel, either with him coming to encourage them face-to-face, or perhaps with the idea that in his absence, they could just do it for him anyway. I sometimes think that actually death can be a catalyst for others to keep up the momentum of things started by the person who has died. Often people say, "Well he did it like that. Surely we're not going to let it falter as we carry on with this?" And Paul in this is also seeking to enable them to make additional endeavours, even to the point of maybe suffering and struggling in their faith in the way that Paul has, in order that they might be fed and nurtured in the Gospel. I just wish, and hope, that you will be nurtured by that sort of faith. And that there will be a contentment in

your life, that if you look towards journey's end in *this* world, it's not going to be so much as you falling away into something you don't know about, but actually just that wonderful transformation (as Paul writes elsewhere²) of being changed from one degree of glory to another. Wouldn't that be wonderful?

Now there's a direct connection, I think, with the Gospel. You might not spot it straight away. But actually, this parable, the parable of the workers in the vineyard, has a connection with death and dying. Let me explain. Jesus says, it's a parable of the Kingdom of Heaven. This is what the Kingdom of Heaven is like. And here you have got a scenario where you picture it, perhaps not so much in today's life, but in the days of the time of Jesus, the people who were looking for work would gather in the marketplace in order for those who were hiring workers to come and find them and bring them to where the work was. So early in the morning, the owner of the vineyard goes down to the marketplace. And there's a whole bunch of guys who want to work. And he agrees a contract, he agrees that they will be paid the daily wage which, as Rosie told us from the Bible, was one denarius, a daily wage, pretty much a universal thing for the time. Well, clearly the owner of the vineyard wants the work done more quickly than these labourers will allow, so at nine o'clock he goes back to the marketplace and gathers another band of workers and periodically, right through the day, continues to do the same, until he's got at five o'clock even more joining the throng in the vineyard and working out their labours for him. It's only when the end of work comes in the last hour do we find the surprise: the owner of the vineyard starts to pay his workers, beginning with those who he recruited last. And he pays them, even though they've only worked an hour, with a whole day's wage. Well, that's generous! And this is observed, of course, by those who came earlier. So by the time he gets to the point that people who've been working from nine o'clock in the morning or even earlier, they're beginning to think the generosity of this guy must be really out of this world and maybe they'll get even more. Unfortunately they don't. He pays them as they were contracted, to receive the one denarius, and they have to be content with that.

So what do we understand about this? How do we get into this parable to understand it? Well, I think that the labourers in the vineyard are those who are called to work for the Gospel, for Jesus Christ, for His Kingdom, and in that way are, in a sense, as Paul writes elsewhere³ in Philippians, "working out their salvation in fear and trembling." You see, they are actually working to build up this Kingdom of Heaven that Jesus is talking about. You can imagine what they might be doing: calling other people, working hard to make sure that the vineyard is ready for the final hour. The only problem is, when you're preparing for Heaven, there's only one thing you're going to get. And you can't get any more and you can't get any less. You know that, don't you, when you think about it, because what else can God offer us, other than salvation in Jesus Christ? What else can He give? This is what Jesus gave His life for, and this is what we all desire, and this is what they will labour for. You see, in a sense, you don't get the gift at the end of the day, you get the gift when you agree to come and labour in the vineyard, when you start the process. That's when the owner of the vineyard is duty-bound to give you what He has promised to give. And for us, it's salvation in Christ Jesus and the very entrance into the heavenly realms, so that we will be with Christ forever with our Father God in the heavenly realms. And we do this in the power of God's Holy Spirit. It's as simple as that.

But we can take more things out of this parable. You can also recall and remember that the Gospel we present is the Gospel that reaches out to all and sundry. It's a Gospel that is open for all time, until the Gospel time that

2 2 Corinthians 3:18 [ESV] "And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another."

3 Philippians 2:12-13 [NIVUK 2011] "¹² Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed – not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence – continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, ¹³ for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfil his good purpose."

we're allotted comes to an end, and God calls time. It's also available for all people from all corners of the world. And each in different ways, the different hours of the day in which people are recruited and men are recruited into the vineyard symbolise all of those things. There's a picture, is there not, of the City of God in Revelation⁴, which has 12 gates, theoretically, we could say, for each of the tribes of Israel. Possibly we could say each gate for a disciple of Jesus, of course, taking Judas out of the equation and putting in Matthias. But the idea that there is a gate open from sunset to sunrise for all to stream in, welcomed and blessed by our Saviour Jesus Christ to be part of His everlasting Kingdom is surely to be seen in this parable as well.

Oh, were you looking for a reward? Yes, well, let me tell you about rewards. Rewards aren't additional benefits like something high-powered. No. If you look at the parable of the talents, the reward for your hard work is *more* hard work. But in the Kingdom of Heaven the work is not a labour that tires us out, but it's a work that is given to us by Christ Jesus, which fulfils not only the Kingdom, but also fulfils us.

So, what then shall we look for? Let us seek to live a life that is wholly wonderful and Spirit-filled. Let us follow in the ways of our Lord Jesus Christ, listening to the teachings that he gives to us. That is fine, that sense of contentment, that attachment to Jesus, that actually makes us known to us that our salvation has been received and is working in our lives. And then let us cheerfully work in the vineyard, offering ourselves to God, offering ourselves to His Kingdom, joyfully accepting that as we work for Him, He is always working in us, so that we can be the people that God wants us to be. And at the end of the day, when we are called together into that Kingdom, we're told, "Well done, good and faithful servant. Come, enter, and share my rest."⁵

Amen.

[Transcribed by Hamish Blair with help from <https://otter.ai>]

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4 Revelation 21:12

5 Derived from Matthew 25:14-30 (the parable of the bags of gold) and Hebrews 4:8-11 (entering into God's rest)