

St. Andrew's Anglican Church, Douglas, GA

The Rev. Fr. John E. Commins+ Rector

Scripture: Matthew 20:1-16

"The last will be first, and the first will be last."

Have you ever watched a TV show and you hear right at the very beginning "previously on ..." and then they show you a few flashbacks? I am going to do the very same thing – only I am just going to go back a few words.

Just before today's Holy Gospel from chapter 20 of Matthew's Gospel - at the very end of Chapter 19 Jesus says these words: *'but many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first.'* (Matthew 19:30) If you struggle to understand that – hold on: you are not alone. These words perfectly tie together with Jesus' words that are at the very end of chapter 20. Jesus relates the Kingdom of Heaven to the owner of a vineyard.

This man goes out to the marketplace and hires a crew to come and work in his vineyard with the promise to pay them a denarius for the day's work – the going wage for a full day's work. Three hours later, around 9 AM he heads back out to the marketplace and sees some men who were standing around, not doing anything and tells them if they will come and work for him then he will pay them *"what is right."* Notice – that is the only promise he made. He went out at noon and again around three PM, and made the same offer for workers to come work for him. Then at the eleventh hour or 5 PM he found some others standing around. We need to look a bit more closely at the last group of workers, the ones who were hired when only one hour of the day was left. Ask yourself, why they hadn't been seen before? Weren't they in the marketplace earlier? The vineyard-owner asks them point blank why they haven't been working: *'Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?'* (Matthew 20:6) Their answer is very revealing as they tell him *"because no one has hired us."* So, could it have been that they were the kind of people that everybody **"tried very hard not to hire."** But this landowner went ahead and hired them, and paid them the same as the people who had been slaving away all day in the heat of the sun. Just like in so many of Jesus' parables, the landowner obviously represents Almighty God, and the workers were the people of Israel, or maybe even the whole world.

It might be quite possible that Jesus intended this parable to be a warning to His disciples about their own attitudes. When Jesus said, at the end of chapter 19, that *"many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first"* it may have seemed that when He spoke of 'those at the front' of the pack He was referring to the rich and powerful, and that 'those at the back' meant the disciples themselves. However, I want to suggest to you that what Jesus said was part of His answer to Peter, after Peter asked a somewhat self-centered question saying: *"We have left everything to follow you! What then will there be for us?"* (Matthew 19:27) That is basically asking: "what's in it for us?" A lot of people ask that question – and you may even have asked that at some point. It's possible that Jesus was intending His somewhat confusing sayings about first and last, the front and the back, to be a warning to His disciples themselves. They may have been there with Jesus from the very beginning; but others might come in much later and end up getting paid just the same "reward" as they did. Think about that. God's grace is not something you can bargain with or try to store up and it isn't the kind of thing that one

person can have a lot of and someone else only a little. One way of looking at this parable is that what people get from serving God and His kingdom is not a 'wage' at all, and it is not a reward for your works. I have said it before and I will say it again – you cannot earn your way to heaven! There is no way to earn your way to heaven! So how do you get to heaven?

God doesn't make contracts with us, as if we could bargain or negotiate for a better deal. God makes covenants, in which He promises us everything and expects everything from us in return. He promises us everything, and you know what – God keeps His promises. He is not rewarding us for effort, but doing what comes naturally to His loving and overflowingly generous nature. He does this knowing, especially since Jesus took on flesh, that we are frail, humans and we usually cannot, and no matter how hard we try - will not, be able to keep our part of the covenant. It happened with the covenants with Noah, Abraham, Moses, David – and even with the New Covenant that Jesus made with us. The important thing to remember is that God is faithful – and no matter what we do – He will always faithfully keep His part of the covenant – as He has done from the beginning of time.

Another point we can take from this parable is that God is out in the marketplace, looking for the people everybody else tried to ignore, welcoming them on the same terms, surprising them (and everybody else) with His generous grace. It is so important for us to remember that God's invitation that Jesus delivers to us beginning with John 3:16 is always there for the 'world' to accept. *"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that **whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life**. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. **Whoever believes in him is not condemned**, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son."* (John 3:16-18) Like accepting the invitation from the landowner to come and be a part of his vineyard – no matter what time you accept – the key, my friends, is accepting; it doesn't matter if it is 6 AM or 9 AM or noon, or 3 or 5; the key is that you accept – or in this case – believe. Listen to this phrase: *"whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."* What is the key? **Believe.** Verse 17 tells us that Jesus came to save the world – not just Israel, or the United States of America, or Coffee County, or Douglas – but the entire world – but they must accept the invitation. Verse 18 further clarifies that believing is key: *"Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son."*

It is so important to notice that in all three verses there is nothing that says WHEN it is that you have to believe. It doesn't matter where you have been, or what you have done – believing in Jesus will change your life – forever and for all eternity! Accepting Jesus as Lord brings forgiveness for your sins - because you will want to seek His forgiveness – and He will willingly give it. Like the workers in the vineyard - it does not matter when in your life that you say yes – and accept Jesus' invitation – but that you accept it.

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Sunday, September 24, 2017, Year A

I have been blessed to personally witness transformations take place in people's lives when they accept Jesus – and sometimes it is in the final days of their lives. I have seen people lead absolutely horrible lives – but found Jesus – or should I say Jesus found them – and their lives and their hearts change. Many times, I have been with them as they passed into eternity – they knew that they knew that they were going to meet their Savior, with a peace that is indescribable. I don't care who you are, or how old you are – truly knowing Jesus and believing in Him will bring you eternal life in Him. Jesus said it and you CAN believe it. God keeps His promises! Sounds too easy, doesn't it? God made it that way so that we can easily accept Him, follow Him and believe in Him.

There are many ministries going out to people groups - risking their lives to bring the Gospel to them – and so many people are learning about Jesus and accepting His invitation. Muslims are seeing Jesus come to them in dreams and visions – and risking everything, including families – accepting Jesus as Lord. Once again, I will say it - it doesn't matter where you have been, or what you have done – believing in Jesus will change your life – forever and for all eternity! It doesn't matter if it is in the early part of your life - there are people who can't remember when they first accepted Jesus – they have just had Jesus their whole lives, or at the eleventh hour – it doesn't matter - no one is keeping score – except God – and He welcomes you to an eternity with Him. That is what this parable is all about. *“The last will be first, and the first will be last.”* (Matthew 20:16) When it all comes down to it – it doesn't matter when you said yes – but that you did say yes.