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MATTHEW
for
EVERYONE

PART 2
CHAPTERS 16-28

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chapter 7 of the prophetic book of Daniel, where God's kingdom will be established at last with the overthrow of evil and the vindication of God's people. Then those who have given up everything to follow Jesus will find themselves not only rescued from eternal death, but actually ruling with Jesus himself in the new world.

He speaks of the Twelve, and of their twelve thrones. It is probable that the Twelve themselves thought he meant this literally. They were soon to find that one of their number would turn traitor, and that the central throne in the whole picture was not the normal kind, but consisted of two planks of wood and four nails. The fate that was waiting for Jesus in Jerusalem would underline, in the starkest way possible, that God's new world comes through the complete reversal of all normal ideas of kingship and earthly greatness.

MATTHEW 20.1-16

The Workers in the Vineyard

¹'So you see,' Jesus continued, 'the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard. ²He agreed with the workers to give them a pound a day, and sent them off to his vineyard.'

³'He went out again in the middle of the morning, and saw some others standing in the marketplace with nothing to do.

⁴"You too can go to the vineyard," he said, "and I'll give you what's right." ⁵So off they went.

'He went out again about midday, and then in the middle of the afternoon, and did the same. ⁶Then, with only an hour of the day left, he went out and found other people standing there.

"Why are you standing here all day with nothing to do?" he asked them.

⁷"Because no one has hired us," they replied.

"Well," he said, "you too can go into the vineyard."

⁸"When evening came, the vineyard-owner said to his servant, "Call the workers and give them their pay. Start with the last, and go on to the first."

⁹So the ones who had worked for one hour came, and each of them received a pound. ¹⁰When the first ones came, they thought they would get something more; but they, too, each received a pound.

¹¹"When they had been given it, they grumbled against the landowner. ¹²"This lot who came in last", they said, "have only worked for one hour – and they've been put on a level with us! And we did all the hard work, all day, and in the heat as well!"

¹³"My friend," he said to one of them, "I'm not doing you any wrong. You agreed with me on one pound, didn't you? ¹⁴Take it! It's yours! And be on your way. I want to give this fellow who came at the end the same as you. ¹⁵Or are you suggesting that I'm not allowed to do what I like with my own money? Or are you giving me the evil eye because I'm good?"

¹⁶So those at the back will be at the front, and the front ones at the back.'

One of the great inventions of modern Western society is the trade union. For far too long those with money, land and privilege shamelessly exploited those who had none. When, after a long struggle, workers with no power except their own labour managed to stand together and force the issue with the rich and strong, it was a great day for freedom and justice.

But over the course of the twentieth century things changed. Exploitation and injustice often continued, and the unions often did a fine job in checking or reversing it. But other issues came into the picture, and made life more complicated, more morally ambiguous. In many Western countries now, the role of the unions has become quite different from what their founders envisaged. In some cases this has been for the better; in others, in my judgment, for the worse.

One of the ways in which some unions have changed from

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their original purpose is that they have often set workers against one another. They have insisted on different pay for different jobs, even if the employers had other ideas. Such unions would have been horrified at the story Jesus told about this employer and the workers who laboured, some for the whole day, others for part, and others again for only the last hour. Indeed, we are not surprised when, in the story, the workers themselves grumbled. Where is the sense of fairness, of justice, in paying the last workers the same as the first?

It's important to realize that Jesus doesn't intend the story to serve as a comment on the social justice of his day. How likely such an incident is to have happened we can only guess, but most people who have studied that world think it is very unlikely. Jesus is accepting, for the purpose of the story, the social and economic power of the landowner, in order to say something about God; what he would say to rich landowners themselves, then and now, may be guessed from chapter 19.

But what is he saying about God, and why is he saying it here? To answer this 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. It is curious, we may suppose, that they hadn't been spotted before. Had they not been in the marketplace earlier? The vineyard-owner questions them: why haven't you been working? Their answer is revealing: nobody has hired us, nobody has given us a job. Nobody, in other words, wanted them. They were, perhaps, the sort of people everybody tried not to hire.

But the landowner hired them, and paid them the same as the people who had been slaving away all day in the heat of the sun. As in so many of Jesus' stories, the landowner is obviously standing for God, and the workers for Israel. Who are the different categories of workers meant to represent?

Jesus probably intends the **parable** as a warning to the **disciples** themselves about their own attitudes. When he said, at

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the end of the previous chapter, that those at the front would end up at the back, and vice versa, it may have seemed that 'those at the front' was referring to the rich and powerful, and that 'those at the back' meant the disciples themselves. However, that saying was part of the answer to Peter, after his somewhat self-centred question in 19.27 ('We've left everything and followed you; so what is our reward?'). It's possible that, already in chapter 19, Jesus is intending the riddling saying about first and last, the front and the back, to be a warning to the disciples themselves: don't think that, because you've been close to me so far, you are now the favoured few for all time.

That, I believe, is the main thrust of this story in chapter 20. It goes only too well, when we read it like this, with the rest of the chapter, which is a warning to the disciples about the danger they are in, supposing that, because Jesus is bringing in the **kingdom of heaven**, they are going to become rich and famous in their turn. That's not the sort of thing, Jesus warns them, that God's kingdom is about. They may have set out with Jesus from the very beginning; but others may well come in much later and end up getting paid just the same, the regular daily wage (I have used 'pound' here to translate *denarius*, which was the regular daily wage for a manual labourer).

God's grace, in short, is not the sort of thing you can bargain with or try to store up. It isn't the sort of thing that one person can have a lot of and someone else only a little. The point of the story is that what people get from having served God and his kingdom is not, actually, a 'wage' at all. It's not, strictly, a reward for work done. God doesn't make contracts with us, as if we could bargain or negotiate for a better deal. He makes **covenants**, in which he promises us everything and asks of us everything in return. When he keeps his promises, he is not rewarding us for effort, but doing what comes naturally to his overflowing generous nature.

There is always a danger that we get cross with God over

this. People who work in church circles can easily assume that they are the special ones, God's inner circle. In reality, 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. The earliest church clearly needed to learn that lesson. Is there anywhere in today's church that doesn't need to be reminded of it as well?

MATTHEW 20.17–28

The Cup He Had to Drink

¹⁷Jesus was on his way up to Jerusalem. He took the twelve disciples aside in private, while they were on the road, and said to them,

¹⁸'Look here. We're going up to Jerusalem. The son of man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they're going to condemn him to death. ¹⁹'They will hand him over to the pagans, and they're going to make fun of him, and torture him, and crucify him. And on the third day he will be raised.'

²⁰Then the mother of Zebedee's sons came up, with her sons, to Jesus. She bowed low in front of him and indicated that she had a special request to make.

²¹'What d'you want?' he asked her.

'It's about these two sons of mine,' she said to him. 'Please say that, when you're king, they may sit, one at your right hand and one at your left.'

²²'You don't know what you're asking for,' said Jesus. 'Can you two drink the cup I'm going to drink?'

'Yes, we can,' they replied.

²³'Well,' said Jesus, 'so you will drink my cup, then! But sitting at my right and left is not something I can grant. That's up to my father to give to whoever he has in mind.'

²⁴When the other ten heard this they were annoyed with the two brothers. ²⁵But Jesus called them together.

'You know how it is with pagan rulers,' he said. 'They lord

it over their subjects. They get all high and mighty and let everybody know it. ²⁶But that's not how it's to be with you. If any of you wants to be great, he must be your servant. ²⁷If any of you wants to be first, he must be the slave of all. ²⁸That's how it is with the son of man: he didn't come to have servants obey him, but to be a servant – and to give his life as "a ransom for many".'

When I was a boy we used to read eagerly about the heroes of old. One of the most famous was King Arthur, a British king from the early sixth century. We had plenty of books that told stories about him, and you can go and see his various castles, like the spectacular one at Tintagel in Cornwall. But there isn't actually much known about him that will pass as serious history. Most of it comes to us through legend, poetry, song and (frankly) romantic wishful thinking.

However, one of the most important stories about Arthur, and about the knights that sat at his famous Round Table, still carries power today. It's about their quest for the Holy Grail – the cup that Jesus supposedly used at the Last Supper. In this cup, according to legend, Joseph of Arimathea (whom we shall meet in Matthew 27.57) had then caught Jesus' blood as it drained from his body on the cross. Another legend suggested that Joseph had brought the cup to Britain. Somehow it had become lost; but the knights were determined to find it, and their quest then became a great act of devotion, loyalty and courage.

The idea of a quest to find Jesus' cup goes all the way back to passages like this one in the New Testament – where we find that Jesus stands on their heads all the usual ideas about royalty, nobility and the like. This isn't the last time we shall meet the idea of a 'cup' from which Jesus must drink, and it's important that we get clear at this stage what it's all about.

At the heart of the story (throughout these chapters, but