

Sermon on Matthew 20: 1-16

You've Gotta Know How to Read It

Recently, the Croatian theologian Miroslav Volf came to Australia to give some lectures and made an appearance on the ABC's program Q&A.

Q&A is based on a pretty simple premise as you probably know.

A panel of people answer questions about all manner of subjects and are moderated by Tony Jones.

It's kind of a 'public square' exercise in open dialogue.

Often when there are Christian people on the panel, they are asked questions which seek to draw them into admitting faith has, among other things, a conflict with science – that faith and rational enquiry are somehow at odds with each other.

It's in part a way to put the Christian on the spot publicly, but also a way of hinting that Christianity is backward looking, anti-intellectual, and nervous about engaging in the rough and tumble of public discourse where hard questions are going to be asked.

It's a bit of a trap in other words.

So at the end of the show this particular night, Tony Jones couldn't resist putting the question to Miroslav Volf and I'm paraphrasing here...

'So do you believe in Genesis?' , Jones enquired.

'Yes of course I do.', Volf replied without hesitation.

'So all that stuff about creation in 7 days etc, you accept that?'

'Well, you've gotta know how to read it.', was Volf's final response before the show finished seconds later.

You've gotta know how to read it.

And in one fell swoop not only did he dispel the nonsense that Christianity is anti-science, but was able to put a gentle challenge back to Jones and the watching public.

In your eagerness to criticise the faith, have you ever actually read Genesis properly?

The Gospels?

The life and work of Jesus?

The Kingdom of God?

Have you ever considered the long and robust tradition of interpretation and debate over how you interpret the text or have you just stuck with the stereotype?

You've gotta know how to read it.

In other words, we don't read a parable the way we read a historical section.

We don't read the psalms the way we read Revelation.

We don't read Paul's ethical imperatives the way we read the miracle stories of the Gospels.

The truth can be heard in all, but it is heard in different ways.

Scripture is such a central part of our tradition and understanding of God, the best way we do it justice is by being sensitive to its nuances, its cultural conditioning, its literary styles, its diversity, when we read and listen for God's voice.

Evangelical commentators like John Stott have pointed out for a long while that recognising the human element of Scripture strengthens the notion of its inspiration, rather than weakens it.

God worked through human hands and lives to reveal his truths, a miracle in itself.

So there's no threat to faith by acknowledging the human side of things.

If such a thought sounds familiar it should.

Just as Christ was God incarnate in the flesh, so in Scripture we find God's inspiring Word witnessed to in the flesh by human messengers.

If we think there's a problem acknowledging the human aspects of Scripture we're going to have even greater problems believing that God was incarnate as a human being.

You've gotta know how to read it and with whom.

We don't read on our own, we read in company, together, and very, very slowly.

We read with the grand tradition of the saints of the church who have come before us who help us interpret the text in our own context.

They sought to read in their era and hear God's word afresh for their situation, so we do the same, yet we allow their insights to feed into our own.

Of course, the other part of reading Scripture rightly is recognising that, for Christians, it's not like other literature.

We believe it's inspired: inspired in its writing, and we pray inspired in our reading, such that the living word, Jesus Christ, jumps off the page from the written word and compels our attention and allegiance.

The result of reading Scripture together should be passionate disciples of Christ seeking to share his love with others and a church binding together as Christ's own body on earth.

But in order for this to happen faithfully, powerfully, you've gotta know how to read it.

There needs to be prayer and thought and consideration given to different factors.

There needs to be humility and openness to learning.

This is not to say that we will always come to the same conclusions.

Scripture generally opens up meaning rather than closes it down, so it is possible for faithful readers to come to different conclusions.

This ought, in most cases, to be a positive thing.

Too often in the church's past we've allowed divergent interpretations to divide the church, rather than enrich it.

None of us see the complete picture... as the great hymn puts it, 'The Lord has yet more light and truth to break forth from his word...'

Scripture is always surprising us.

Always challenging us, always drawing us into new revelations of God, so we need each other to help us read and listen.

Knowing how to read it doesn't mean knowing it all, none of us ever will.

In Paul's day the institution of slavery was simply a given in society, and so we have numerous passages in Paul where he implores slaves to 'obey their masters'.

Faithful reading of Scripture over the next 17 centuries led the church to recognise that the institution of slavery itself was actually untenable in light of the Gospel of love and freedom.

So today we read those passages very differently to how they would have been read when they were first written.

You've gotta know how to read it.

So we come to read the parable of the workers in the vineyard and to listen for its proclamation of the Kingdom.

'The Kingdom of heaven is like...', Jesus begins.

Thus we know we're about to get a picture of something rather than a comprehension.

The Kingdom of heaven is like a vineyard owner who hires workers at various points in the day, some only an hour before the end and then pays them all the same.

What's worse he pays them publicly, thus drawing the ire of those hired first.

They had an agreement for a denarius for their day's work, but when they see the later hired workers receiving the same amount they grumble that it's not fair.

'Do you begrudge my generosity?', the vineyard owner asks them.

Here we have an industrial relations conundrum.

Is the vineyard owner being just by paying them all the same despite the difference in worked hours?

He certainly honours the contract with the first hired, so in that sense he's keeping his word.

But we can surely relate to the early workers' complaint that it seems unjust that they should receive the same as those who were hired late in the day.

You can see the trade union campaigns now... equal pay for equal work, not an unreasonable assumption we might well argue.

How can the Kingdom of heaven be like this? It doesn't seem right or fair.

The point of the story is of course to get us to focus on the owner of the vineyard in the first place, as obvious an allegory of God as you'll find.

We're supposed to marvel at the amazing generosity and grace of the master in wanting to see those hired later as no less loved and cared for as the others.

This is how the parable is intended to be read.

Unlike your earthly kingdoms, in the Kingdom of God the first will be last and the last, first.

It is grace, mercy, and generosity, that is at the heart of God's justice, rather than entitlement or just deserts.

Salvation is the same whether you came into the Kingdom many years ago or this very day, whether you've laboured long and hard in the faith or just accepted God's gift of love in recent days, whether your faith has been strengthened by years of service and prayer, or whether you're still struggling to trust the God you've not known before.

The thief on the cross is a perfect example of the message of this parable. 'Remember me when you come into your Kingdom.', the thief pleads.

'Truly I tell you', Jesus responds, 'today you will be with me in paradise.'

All of this goes against the grain of course.

What do you mean, Jesus, that the first will be last and the last first?

That my time of work and toil on earth means nothing in terms of eternal reward and consequence?

That's not how it's supposed to be, surely?

We struggle with this parable because almost without thinking we read ourselves into the role of the first hired.

We see ourselves as the long suffering, hardworking faithful who deserve higher status, or more say, because of our longevity of service.

I was in a church once when a young ministry candidate (not myself I hasten to add), stood up to question something that was happening as part of a congregational meeting.

He was quickly shouted down by the chairperson, a long serving member, who declared, 'You're only here for five minutes and then you'll be gone.

You have no right to have a say.'

Given that Jesus went around sharing with tax collectors and Gentiles, it's probably no wonder the religious establishment was none too pleased.

They weren't the good, Torah abiding people of faith Jesus should have been commending.

The parable of the prodigal son displays this attitude perfectly.

The hard working elder brother is stunned when his younger brother, the one who left and wasted his father's money on wild living, returns to a party and an assortment of lavish gifts.

Entitlement reigns supreme.

I want what's owed thank you very much and not a penny less.

But let's read it as if we were the last hired.

As if we've waited all day not knowing if we would have work.

Not knowing whether there would be any food for our family, or employment to keep the home fires burning.

And then imagine our surprise when at the end of the day the master gets us all together and says, here's the pay I want to give you.

And we receive the same as those hired first.

Read it as if we're the last hired.

The gift of new life in Christ is as powerful for you today as for those who have known it their whole lives.

Imagine how we might feel?

Rather than feeling entitled, or puffed up with pride, might we not be overwhelmed by a generosity, a love, we could scarcely have predicted or imagined?

And might we not get a picture of a God whose love is so broad, whose mercy is so deep, whose arms are outstretched in a gesture of eternal welcome?

And might we not come home into God's heart, for whom we were made and shaped and formed in the first place?

And might we not in amid this world of grief and upheaval, know the constant that will sustain us our whole life through, and beyond?

You've gotta know how to read.

This is a parable of course, and by their very nature their meaning is often elusive and mysterious.

Such stories speak of the Kingdom of God in picture form where allegory and representation may play a greater or lesser part, where details may be sketchy and images confusing (I'm not sure I'll ever understand the parable of the Shrewd Manager in Luke!!).

Even getting a glimpse, a mere glimpse of the Kingdom as we read will mean we're reading rightly and faithfully.

But perhaps parables help us to read rightly in another way too.

Perhaps such stories help us to read our own lives faithfully as well.

Perhaps they help us to see our living as somehow bound up in the purposes of God, somehow designed to reflect God's glory and to trust that God will use our service in ways we can't imagine to brighten his world.

We do a good job a lot of the time at tearing ourselves down, at imagining who we are and what we offer is pretty insignificant in the grand scheme of things.

This isn't how God wants us to read our lives as far as I can see.

The Kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who hired workers.

He hired some in the morning, but then later saw others and hired them too.

Then later he saw others and hired them too.

Then even later he hired some more.

They all worked in his vineyard together.

And at the end of the day he gathered them all and cared for them all the same.

It doesn't matter when you were hired, God calls you to work in his vineyard as you're able and loves you just the same.

You've just gotta know how to read it.

Amen.