

OHP - Linda

Anyone know who this is?

It's the supermodel Linda Evangelista who is attributed with saying one of the most famous quotes about what motivates supermodels, anyone know what the quote is?

Well she was quoted 22 years ago in 1990, in Vogue magazine as saying
OHP - 'We don't wake up for less than \$10,000 a day.'

I'm sure that would be a pretty good incentive for any of us to wake up but it raises the question have you ever stopped to think about what motivates you?

What motivated you to get out of bed this morning and head to church?

What will be your motivation to get out of bed tomorrow morning and take on the responsibilities you have for the week?

Anyone facing the prospect of earning £10k tomorrow?

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Well I ask because we have a story this morning which is all about motivation.

This parable is part of our ongoing series on the Kingdom of Heaven and we will learn today what attitudes should motivate the citizens of the heavenly kingdom in their commitment to serving Jesus.

It's a story told by Jesus in a striking and provocative way because it challenges an assumption we have about the way the world works.

There is a general operating principle in our culture that all of us have experienced which provides rewards and incentives to keep us motivated.

It's clearly the basic principle that underlies the wages some of us have the opportunity to earn, whether we earn £10k a day or not; roll your sleeves up and get on with the job and in exchange you'll get rewarded with pay.

The bonus culture that continually hits the headlines is also rooted in this principle, do a good job, work hard for the best interests of the company and you will be rewarded.

But money isn't the only incentive for our motivation; Think of the Paralympics currently in full flow. What better motivation have the athletes got than the prospect of competing on the world stage and winning a medal? Or think of the volunteers taking annual leave to staff the venues, in return for seeing a little of the second biggest sporting event on the planet.

So we are used to the idea that rewards are given to motivate us.

And we don't like it when this reward principle gets messed around with. We feel a sense of injustice and unfairness when those who don't put the work in are rewarded.

Think of the Azerbaijan bantamweight boxer Mago-med Abdul-ham-i-dov, remember him?

OHP – here he is being declared the winner of his London Olympic bout against Satoshi Shimizu of Japan.

Magomed was declared the winner of the fight even though he hit the canvas 6 times. **OHP –**

His opponent, the commentators and the crowd watching were staggered by the result; it seemed unbelievable. It was clear to everyone that Satoshi had earned his win; and subsequently following a protest from the Japanese the decision was overturned and the referee was expelled from the Olympics

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And it's this basic operating principle of 'give me what I'm due' that makes the parable in our reading this morning really stand out.

Jesus tells a story of a vineyard owner who pays his workers the same wages whether they have worked a full day or only one hour. They all leave with the same amount of cash in their pay packet. And those who have worked a longer shift shout 'hang on, that's not fair pay me what I'm due.'

Instinctively many of us will side with the labourers and are sympathetic to their sense of injustice, because it challenges the reward operating principle we're used to. None of us like to be ripped off.

And it's not an unreasonable sense of injustice either; which of us would tolerate a boss who pays the same wages to his workers whether they have worked 12 hours or only 1? I'm sure if you'd worked the 1 hour and walked away with a full day's pay you'd think he was a great boss, but only because of the comparison to the other workers; if the coin was flipped, your appreciation would quickly turn to outrage I'm sure.

Any Trade Union would have a field day in seeking proportional fairness for the workers.

So what are we to make of this story that Jesus tells?
What are we to learn about those who belong to the Kingdom of Heaven?

Fundamentally we are to learn that there is a radical nature to the ethics found in the Kingdom of Heaven which are a challenge to us. And it's worth noting that this phrase Kingdom of Heaven **OHP** - is actually unique to Matthew's gospel, which is something I've learnt as I prepared this talk.

It feels like a familiar phrase to those of us who have read the bible for a while, it seems almost interchangeable with Kingdom of God but in reality the phrase Kingdom of Heaven only appears 32 times in the bible and always in Matthew.

Why? Well Matthew wants us to reflect on the fact that Kingdom of Heaven has a physical realm, what Jesus teaches is not just a set of ideas, not simply a manifesto for how things ought to be.

Matthew wants us to understand that there is a real King who rules over a real kingdom, and the way he governs his kingdom and his citizens is unlike anything we have ever known.

Matthew wants to highlight the tension that exists between God's real kingdom and all our earthly kingdoms. He wants to contrast our experience of living under our earthly authorities with what it is like to live under Yahweh, the Author of life's authority; living under his jurisdiction, in his kingdom in the here-and-now.

So the expression, Kingdom of Heaven, serves as a counterpoint to all earthly authorities.

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How so in this story? What are we to learn about what it means for those who are live in the Kingdom of Heaven?

Well we need to start by considering why Matthew puts the story here in this part of his biography of Jesus.

The first thing to note is that the chapter starts with the word 'For' vs1; 'For the kingdom of heaven is like...' and that tells us that this story follows on from what was happening in chapter 19. Notice too that the last verse of chapter 19, on the previous page, is the same in the last verse in our reading, though the order does change, look with me:

19 vs 30 reads 'But many who are first will be last and many who are last will be first'

and 20:16 reads 'so the last will be first and the first will be last.'

Having topped and tailed the parable with this familiar phrase Matthew understand that this story expands on what the phrase means

So what does it mean that the first will be last and last will be first? Well its rooted in two encounters Jesus has earlier on in chp 19, the first is with a group of children and the other is with a rich young man.

Look back with me to vs 13. We read that a group of young children are brought to Jesus to be blessed and prayed for. The disciples don't see this a priority. But Jesus in vs 14 makes the point that the Kingdom of Heaven belongs to those who are like the children.

In other words God is looking for the child-like qualities of being utterly dependant on others, these children are helpless and vulnerable and can make no claim of power to control their own circumstances and destinies. These children would have been at the bottom of the social ladder, lacking in status – their value is given to them by Jesus – 'don't hinder them' he says, 'don't stop them, let them come to me.'

Contrast that with what is in vs16- 23 .

Here we read about the encounter with a rich young man who has a question.

He wants to know what good thing should he do to get eternal life, Jesus' answer obey the law.

He says 'done that, what else?' He recognises he still lacks something; that there is more to obtaining eternal life than just obeying a set of rules.

And Jesus answers in vs21, effectively, by saying if you want to be perfect loose the thing that has replaced God in your life, the thing that has become a distraction and is now your driving force; loose that thing which defines you and has become your motivation, the reason you get out of bed, and replace it with me.

For this man, the thing that has become his driving force, the thing that defines his identity is his wealth. And Jesus asks him to exchange his god of wealth for the true God of life.

But the man rejects the invitation of eternal life and leaves sad and distressed, knowing that Jesus has pinpointed the key area that defines him, one which he feels he cannot give up.

Jesus ends the encounter reflecting on what a challenge it is for the rich to enter the Kingdom of Heaven.

And you see the contrast don't you?

The rich young man; someone with substance, position and significance, unable and unwilling to enter the Kingdom of Heaven is compared to those with no status and low position, children who allowed to meet and touch the Author of Life.

And at this point we read in vs 25 that Jesus' disciples are astonished by what they have just seen and heard. Why? Well because wealth was often associated in the OT with God's blessing and favour. It was seen as a reward for obedience to God, you got rich because you've done the right thing, you've put the hard work into obeying God and he has provided a new status and position. If you were rich you had been rewarded by God.

You see this at the start of Psalm 112 – OHP-

Psalm 112:1-3

Praise the Lord.

*Blessed are those who fear the Lord,
who find great delight in his commands.
Their children will be mighty in the land;
the generation of the upright will be blessed.
Wealth and riches are in their houses,
and their righteousness endures forever.*

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So after this encounter with the rich young man the disciples are left to wonder; if those who are seemingly blessed... those thought to be favoured by God... if they don't get eternal life, can anyone be saved? Who can enter the Kingdom of Heaven?

Jesus' answer? vs 26 Left to their own efforts no one can enter - it's impossible, only through God's power; his initiative, intervention and invitation is it be possible.

At this point Peter pipes up, he's understood that the implications of this encounter with the rich man affect everyone not just the rich; and he reminds Jesus, in vs27 that he and his travelling companions have done the very thing the young man couldn't.

This small gathering of men, Jesus' disciples, have given up everything to follow Jesus; their livelihoods, their family, friends; their homes, money, everything and now Peter wants to know
'So what's in it for us? What will our reward be for doing the thing the young rich man couldn't?'

And it's this question **OHP-**

"What then will there be for us?"

that sets up Jesus' parable, because Jesus wants to gently challenge Peter's expectation that he is entitled to a reward.

Jesus knows that Peter has given everything up to follow him, and from vs 28-30 Jesus acknowledges that blessing will come to his disciples; but Peter's mistake was to loose sight of what he has found in place of those things he has given up, he focuses on the rewards he felt were owed to him because of the sacrifices he made to follow Jesus.

So Jesus tells this story, in chp 20, to challenge Peter about how he should respond to God's calling on his life and in particular to reflect on what should motivate him to follow and serve his king.

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So flip back to chp 20.

Jesus pictures a vineyard owner at harvest time looking for seasonal workers. The owner goes looking 5 times to the market place, the local job centre if you like, to look for workers for his vineyard.

For Peter and the others a typical working day would have meant a twelve hour shift starting around 6am, so the owner's first recruitment drive is very early and he hires his first group of workers to work the whole day. They agree terms and settle on wage of 1 denarius and the workers set off to the vineyard to earn their pay.

A little later the harvest requires more workers and so the owner returns to the job centre to get more help.

Many people at this time would have lived day-to-day, without regular work but earning just enough to meet the needs of that day. This meant that if they didn't find work on any particular day they would go hungry.

So many would continue to wait for as long as necessary in the hope of getting hired.

So it's no surprised that the landowner finds more workers when he returns at 9am, 12 and 3pm as we see in vs 4. They all agree to be paid whatever is right, most probably some proportion of the going day and head off to work to earn their pay.

The last time the vineyard owner returns to the market place, in vs6, it's about 5pm. Again he finds workers waiting, and these guys must be fairly desperate for work given that they're still waiting with only an hour of the working day left.

They have waited all day in the hope of getting work and finally at the eleventh hour it comes to them. What relief this last group must have felt, the situation was looking pretty bleak at 5pm but now thankfully they won't be going home empty handed.

It might only be one twelfth of a denarius but it's better than nothing, right? To have some work is better than none, so off they go to and earn their pay.

But notice in vs6 & 7 that this last wave of recruitment is more about the owner's desire to employ than the needs of his vineyard, after all what could he realistically expect the workers to achieve in the last few moments of the working day? How productive would they be in reality?

He asks them why they still hanging around and when they say him 'we need to work, so we're waiting for it' so he employs them out of his compassion and generosity so that they wouldn't miss out. He would rather they worked than see them end the day empty handed.

In parable terms the vineyard owner is God and this story is a picture of his willingness and initiative to choose people for his Kingdom. It is God who calls his people. He goes out looking for any who would respond to his invitation.

The reason that any of us have faith is because God had made the first move. His generosity and love for us has called us into relationship with him. None of us have chosen God he has chosen us.

Consider:

OHP- 1 John 4:10

This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us...

or **OHP-** John 15:16

You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you...

And it's humbling to be reminded of this. We turn to God because he first turns to us.
The workers are working away knowing they are earning only because the owner went out to look for them.

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And the challenge to Peter and to us is to remember that God has called us for no other reason than he wanted us to join him. None of us were selected for our merit or capabilities; none of us have earnt the right to belong to the kingdom of Heaven.

The bible describes our relationship with God as being like his enemies (Romans 5:10), outside his blessing and companionship and face his judgement and we're powerless to do anything about it.

But we along with Peter are offered heavenly citizenship because God came to us. It is why Jesus says the Kingdom of heaven belongs to the little children, in chp19, it a picture of the helpless, the vulnerable, those utterly dependant on others, those who can make no claim of power to control their own circumstances and destinies.

The kingdom of heaven belongs to those who recognise this and see that they're only access to the Author of Life and his kingdom is through his intervention and work.

Next the story moves on to the end of the working shift comes and its now time to pay the workers, to reward them for their efforts. And here's the sting in the story, the unexpected twist, those who were hired last are paid the same amount as those who are hired first, everybody gets a full days pay irrespective of whether they worked the full day. And so, in vs 12 the protest and complaint comes from the workers from the early shift,

'that's not fair, we've worked more than they did so we deserve to be paid more than them...'

The response of the employer is to gently remind the worker of the terms he agreed to work for, 'Friend, why get upset? You got what we agreed you would get.'

And the central issue is the self-centeredness of the complaining workers.

These were people who did not have regular jobs, so getting the money they agreed to work for was more than they would have expected if the vineyard owner had not hired them. No vineyard owner, no wages, right? That was the fear of the last recruited workers in the story. Had the owner stayed at home that day no one would have been recruited, whether he met them first or last.

Instead the worker did get a job for that day and so should be thankful, he should be grateful that he can now provide and care for his family. In making his complaint the worker is only thinking of himself and not about the intervention of his employer that provided him with work. They've blinded by their self-centred envy.

And so those hired last were thought unworthy of what they received yet they were paid first and treated equally. In contrast those who were hired first were paid last and in their view treated unfairly, treated as equals with those who were hired last.

For Peter and the disciples the implications are obvious. Although Peter and the other 11 were first to give up everything to follow Jesus, in contrast to the rich young man, Jesus says all true disciples are in the same position.

You don't get a greater reward for being the first one chosen you're just grateful you were chosen at all.

Jesus teaches that the citizens of the kingdom of heaven are not motivated by rewards; it's enough that they have been chosen in the first place.

And in gratitude they work for the King because without his intervention they know they would be far worse off, just like those who live outside the kingdom. God is generous in moving to rescue us from his judgement.

So this parable is a lesson on gratitude in our walk with Christ.

If we think that we deserve God's blessing or feel that our commitment to his work needs to be rewarded then we have not understood the gospel. That's not to say God will not reward at all, its clear from chp 19 that anyone who has given up land, possessions or family to follow Jesus, will be rewarded, but its not to be the focus for motivating us to service and commitment. We're not putting in to get something out.

God's blessing is not awarded because of what we have done or how long we have been doing it. Nor is our value to God measured by our commitment to him. God is not in our debt because of what we have given up to follow him. He owes us nothing.

Many of us have been volunteering at the mission for years, some of us for decades. Others of us have made career choices or chosen to live in Tower Hamlets and Hackney because of the gospel, knowing that you're here to serve God in this community.

And these choices, for some of us have lead to us making significant sacrifices. And in this passage, Jesus wants us to ask one another why have we made these choices? What motivates us?

And having made those decisions what is our attitude to God? Do we think it gives us right to be treated a little differently?

The 19th century Danish theologian Søren Kierkegaard once wrote in his journals:

OHP-

'I am a poor wretch whom God took charge of, and for whom he has done so indescribably much more than I ever expected... that I only long for the peace of eternity in order to do nothing but thank him.'

We learn here in this parable that thankfulness is the right response of the believing person to the goodness of God's work in our lives, and we're to see that gratitude is the defining characteristic of the disciple of Jesus.

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And Jesus is asking Peter and us are you thankful and grateful for what God has given you in spite of what it cost you?

Those who belong to the Kingdom of Heaven are to reflect on what we have been given by God, to reflect on what we have been saved from and to consider what we are being promised, being moved from a place of alienation, separation and judgement to a restored and everlasting loving companionship with the Lord of life.

It's no surprise that Matthew follows this parable with Jesus' prediction for what he gives us, namely his own life to buy us this access to the Heavenly Kingdom.

And through our reflection we can, in the here-and-now, be generous in giving our careers; our relationships; our talents; our resources; our time and ourselves in service of God. And the motivation to service simply comes from a grateful heart.

As one commentator put its **OHP-**

Why is it more blessed to give than to receive? Why does God love a cheerful giver? Why was the poor widow's gift, whilst worth less financially, actually 'more than all the others'? In each case, it is because the gift came out of a grateful life lived in God's presence.