

St James' Church, Weybridge

Trinity 16 (Proper 20) Yr A – 20th September 2026 - Sermon Notes

Introduction and Call to Worship

As Christians we are disciples, labourers in the vineyard. Jesus calls us, unique as we all are, to be a part of working for the building up of his Kingdom, on earth just as it is in heaven.

Today's Readings

First Reading Philippians 1:21-30

The Philippians were always particular friends of Paul. He knows that they will stand firm in the Gospel against the time when he will see them again.

The Gospel Matthew 20:1-16

The parable of the labourers in the vineyard. Who are we? Generous? Or always seeking a deal?

HOMILY *"So the last will be first, and the first will be last."* (Matthew 20:16)

You may be familiar with the hit gameshow, Deal or no Deal. A contestant selects one briefcase from a set of between 20 and 26 cases, each containing a different cash amount ranging from a nominal low value to a top prize (often hundreds of thousands or even a million dollars, depending on the version). The contestant's chosen briefcase remains closed until the end of the game. When the phone rings, a mysterious figure known as the Banker makes a cash offer to buy the contestant's chosen briefcase. The offer is calculated based on the remaining potential amounts, often factoring in risk and probability. The contestant is then faced with the central question: "Deal or No Deal?"

Just in case, I have a phone with me today. But I'm not expecting the banker to call and offer me a cash sum. Because in contrast to the gameshow, the values that mark out a Christian life is the ability and willingness to give faithful and without a grudge of the little that we have, or to put it bluntly, to share with others. There is no deal to be made. God loves us unconditionally and in return we share.

An example of this sharing is our Foodbank, which is vital for a growing number in our community. And that is why our financial giving in the collection at church, or through the Parish Giving Scheme is important too. We give, because we share, and we don't count the cost, in order that God's love can be shared and his kingdom realised here in Weybridge and well beyond. No deal.

In today's Gospel, we read the parable of the labourers in the vineyard. And, like many of the illustrations of Jesus, there is more to the story than appears at first sight. The labourers who worked for just one hour received the same pay as those who worked in the vineyard for a full day! If it happened today we might say, "It's grossly unfair!" or we may ask, "Are you in the union – contact your representative." We may even say from the outside, no deal. But this is not a social comment on pay and conditions today or even in the days when Jesus used this parable to illustrate God's generosity compared with our human tendency towards small-mindedness.

So, what is it about? *"The last will be first, and the first will be last"*. Those words send a chill down my spine because they are so true. Life can feel just like that – we keep waiting and waiting – and ask anyone

who knows me and patience is not really my gifting! Jesus gave Peter the same sort of answer when he challenged him in Matthew's previous chapter. Peter said, *"Look, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?"* (Matthew 19:27). Poor Peter – no deal.

The point about today's parable is that people don't receive wages, or any 'reward' or gold from God for serving. We don't gain by works, action, doing. We don't make a contract with God. There is no box to open, no deal to be struck, no reward in the end. It is simply a joy to be Christ-like. St Ignatius of Loyola, (the founder of the Jesuit communities), in the sixteenth century, made the same point in his prayer, when he asked only *"....to toil and not to seek for rest, to labour and not to ask for any reward, save that of knowing that we do thy will"*.

Serving God is part of being a disciple – its is a vocation and a privilege! In God's time, when our life of service comes to its end, we may pray that we may simply hear the words, *"well done, good and faithful servant"*. Our vocation as Christian servants is not a game-show question of *"deal or no deal"*. Thankfully (well hopefully!)

What about those who were hired during the day. At five o'clock the landowner went out into the marketplace and he found others standing around idle. *"Why?"* he asked. *"Because no one has hired us,"* they replied, all because they were considered surplus to requirements. Why did Jesus make such a point of these men in his parable? Surely it was because these were the very people he came to serve; those left behind by society, those on the margins, the people nobody else wants. Hence, the last will be first – the first shall be last. Does this jar with you?

As we consider how we might apply this parable in our own lives, should we not also give our first consideration to those who are overlooked by society today; those who are less fortunate than the majority of us. We may think of the homeless, those rejected for all sorts of reasons, many beyond their control. Those who have made one mistake and spend the rest of their lives paying for it and those whom we are tempted to label as unforgiveable. Then there are those seen as 'past their use-by date' or written off as incapable; the sick, the misfits, the ridiculed? These are *"the last"* in the world's concerns but they come first for Jesus and what a wonderful comfort and hope that is. Whatever our own failures, Jesus still reaches out to each one of us, draws us into his vineyard and affords us the same reward! Therefore, his Church, his body of disciples today must do the same, we must reach out and bring the last to the front. We must help those whom the world considers the last – they should be our first thought. But is modern life like that? I don't think so. Celebrity culture often seems to me to be the opposite of the last shall be first.

And what is the reward for us – yes I can see some of those cogs moving as you ponder the question of why! Working for the good of the wider community, sharing and caring generously is all a part of continuing the work of Our Lord – today - now. To be a living disciple we must reflect the servant nature of Jesus who looked for the best in all people and the building up of love and community. He touched the lives of those on the edge of society and this is work without a reward and it can be costly. St Paul writes that in suffering for Christ, we suffer with him. There is no reward on earth greater than the privilege of serving the Lord and being invited into his vineyard. The secret of all this is that to serve others as a disciple of Jesus today is its own reward - you can't understand just how liberating this life of service is until you surrender to God and try it! Sharing really is caring and there is no deal is required, just faithfulness. Amen.

Father Damian Harrison-Miles, September 2026.