

# Coach House Church **BEACONS**

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## **FIRST AND LAST**

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**29TH SEPTEMBER 2020**

We have recently had the pleasure of being able to take a holiday. We stayed in Scotland and had the opportunity to visit one of the islands. We decided to go in the car and joined the queue for the ferry which would take us on the 10 minute journey across the water. We were one of the first cars onto the boat which operated on the roll on roll off principle. We were directed to the left hand side of the boat. More cars joined on the right hand side with the last cars joining in the middle of the boat. My sense of fairness told me that as we had got on first we would probably be first to get off. You can imagine my indignation when, on arrival, the middle row of cars was ushered off first. It hardly seemed fair that those who waited the least got away first. But then I remembered the words of Jesus. "Those who are last now will be first then, and those who are first will be last"

It is probably a result of my upbringing, and also because of the way society thinks, that I had a sense of entitlement that I should get off the boat first. I thought that it was my right. Rights are something we hear quite a lot about these days, but we hear very little about responsibilities. Now this thinking is nothing new, people in Jesus time held to similar opinions; that they had a right to get or to keep something. In fact so widespread was this thought that Jesus had to use this argument not once but twice! When something appears in the bible it is important, when it appears twice it is very important.

The words I quoted come at the end of a lengthy passage from the Gospel of Matthew which starts with a rich young man asking Jesus a question. The young man asked Jesus "What good deed must I do to have eternal life?" The young man was wealthy and was probably thinking about buying his way into heaven. As they chatted it turns out that the young man was well versed in the scriptures and had followed the law religiously right from birth. The young man said "I have obeyed all the commandments, what else must I do?" Jesus told him "If you want to be

perfect go and sell all your possessions and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come and follow me" When the young man heard this he went away sad, for he had many possessions.

Put into a modern context this young man had a right to inherit his family fortune. He attended church regularly and gave generously, he didn't engage in any form of corruption, theft, deception or adultery, but Jesus discerned that there was a problem. His heart was not in the right place.

Jesus then pointed out to his disciples that "It is hard for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of Heaven" The disciples were astounded and asked Jesus "Then who in the world can be saved?" Jesus replied "Humanly speaking, it is impossible. But with God everything is possible" Later, referring to the coming Kingdom, Jesus said "Many who are the greatest now will be the least important then, and those who seem least important now will be the greatest then."

Jesus then told this parable – Matthew chapter 20.

"For the Kingdom of Heaven is like the landowner who went out early one morning to hire workers for his vineyard. He agreed to pay them the normal daily wage and sent them out to work. At nine o'clock in the morning he was passing through the marketplace and saw some people hanging around doing nothing. So he hired them telling them he would pay them whatever was right at the end of the day. So they went to work in the vineyard. At noon and again at three o'clock he did the same thing. At five o'clock that afternoon he was in town again and saw some more people standing around. He asked them "why haven't you been working today" They replied "Because no-one hired us" The land owner told them "Go out and join the others in my vineyard" That evening he told the foreman to call the workers in and pay them beginning with the last workers first. When those hired at five o'clock were paid each received a full day's wage. When those hired first came to get their pay they assumed they would receive more. But they too were paid a day's wages. When they received their pay they protested to the owner. "Those people only worked one hour and yet you have paid them just as much as you paid us who worked all day in the scorching heat" He answered one of them, "Friend, I haven't been unfair! Didn't you agree to work all day for the usual wage? Take your money and go. I wanted to pay this last worker the same as you. Is it against the law for me to do what I want with my money? Should you be jealous because I am kind to others?" So those who are last now will be first then, and those who are first will be last"

Now Jesus also had to reprimand the disciples on an earlier occasion. Jesus had noticed the disciples arguing about something. He asked them "What were you discussing out on the road?" The disciples didn't want to answer this question so Jesus sat them down and gave them some advice. "Whoever wants to be first must take last place and be the servant of everyone else" What was it that the disciples had been arguing about? Who was the greatest! They were trying to get one up on each other; perhaps they were thinking that by getting a better standing in this life they would have a better standing in the next life. Jesus quashes this argument in both this instance as he did in explaining the problem with the rich young man.

You see when it comes to the Kingdom of Heaven there are no rights. In fact no-one has a right to enter the Kingdom of Heaven except Jesus himself. It is only by the grace of God that we can enter the Kingdom of Heaven. It is never based on what we have done. As Jesus said "Humanly speaking, it is impossible." No-one can enter the Kingdom of Heaven by going to church every week, or by being nice to everybody, or by giving generously, although we should still do these things. Rather, our heart must be right. We must love the Lord with all our heart and with all our soul and with all our mind.

In the parable Jesus is contrasting two different life styles. One which believes in exercising rights, gaining wealth, climbing the social ladder, putting the letter of the law before the spirit of the law; the other that is happy to serve no matter what the cost, unconcerned about social status or what other people might think, and willing to leave their outcome to God alone.

When I got off that boat I was actually just thankful that I had made it to the other side.

Jesus tells us that it is never too late to join God's boat, it has enough space for everyone. Don't worry about your place in this life or whether you will be first off the boat. Remember, like the Vineyard owner, God is kind to all his workers.

I pray that you will choose to travel on God's boat and I look forward to seeing you on the other side. Amen.



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