



Sermon preached by Dr Alan Rickard on 20th September 2026

Service led by the Worship, Discipleship & Spirituality Group

Readings: Exodus 16: 2-15; Psalm 105: 37-45; Matthew 20: 1-16;
Philippians 1: 21-30

In the Old Testament readings recently the lectionary narrative has been following the Israelites out of Egypt, led by Moses. In last week's reading from Exodus 14 we would have heard about the pillar of cloud protecting them from the Egyptians and of their successful crossing of the Red Sea, while the Egyptians perished - 'the horse and his rider hath he thrown into the sea'. For those of you familiar with Handel's mainly double-choir oratorio 'Israel in Egypt', the choruses just sing themselves off the page as you read the Exodus account! In verse 31 we learn that 'the people feared the Lord and believed in the Lord and in his servant Moses'. However this didn't last very long!

In today's reading, six weeks after leaving Egypt and having recently survived the Red Sea crossing, the Israelites are once again discontented. They are in the wilderness and their complaining, or literally murmuring, comes to Moses' and Aaron's attention that they are about to be killed by hunger. They regret having left Egypt. However, Moses tells them that this is not a complaint against himself and Aaron, but against God. But God does not punish the people for their anxious outbursts. On the contrary, the glory of the Lord appears in a cloud to show God's immediate presence among the complaining crowd. God hears their complaint and provides flocks of quails in the evening and bread in the morning to sustain them, the manna from heaven. The message is clear: trust in the Lord and he will provide for your needs, no matter the circumstances.

When people in our congregation are experiencing upheaval and uncertainty, this story gives the wonderful promise of God's provision, which is reassuring to all of us. It also might serve as a guide for when we're in stressful times to let the rhythms of religious observance — bible reading, prayer and worship, for example — bring order to our lives. As we have already sung in John Greenleaf Whittier's hymn: 'and let our ordered lives confess the beauty of thy peace'.

It is appropriate on behalf of the Worship, Discipleship and Spirituality Group to mention at this point that at Downing Place we offer not just Sunday morning worship, but Open Table regularly on Sunday evenings; midweek worship weekly every Thursday at 11.00am; the opportunity for accompanied prayer after Sunday morning services; and a prayer group meets daytime once a month in the St Columba Chapel. There are also autumn House Groups and *Lectio Divina* sessions starting up again after the summer recess. These and all other activities are listed on our website and in the weekly notices. Please do come along and show your support!

In the Gospel reading for today, Jesus tells the parable of the labourers in the vineyard. At the end of the day, the landowner pays the hired labourers all the same wage, one denarius, whether they started first thing in the morning, working for twelve hours through the heat of the day, or only commenced work at five o'clock in the afternoon. The workers who worked the longest grumble about receiving the same wage as those who worked for just an hour. The landowner says to one of them, 'Friend I am doing you no wrong'. And 'Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?'

The message in verse 16, when Jesus states that 'the last will be first, and the first last', is that no matter how long or how hard a believer works during their lifetime, the reward of eternal life will be the same given to all - an eternity in heaven in the presence of God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Today's Epistle reading, captures Paul writing from a brutal Roman imprisonment, balancing a profound personal readiness for death with a selfless commitment to the ongoing ministry of the believers in Philippi.

He says, 'If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labour for me'. He enjoins them in verse 27 'Only (to) live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ'; and 'I will know you are standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel'.

As we learned from today's Sharing Together, it matters what we do on weekdays as well as on Sundays, as we are the people of God every day of the week.

Sunday by Sunday, since our two churches joined, the church choir has said together the words of the Choristers' Prayer at the conclusion of their morning rehearsal:

'Bless, O Lord, us thy servants, who minister in thy temple.
Grant that what we sing with our lips, we may believe in our hearts,
and what we believe in our hearts, we may show forth in our lives.
Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.'

The core thought of this prayer comes from an ancient 4th-century Latin decree by the Fourth Council of Carthage (c. 398 AD), which instructed cantors to ensure their inner faith matched their outward song. The familiar English version appeared in print in the 1934 Choir Boy's Pocketbook. It is widely associated with groups affiliated with the Royal School of Church Music.

So, in conclusion, two principal truths become apparent. Firstly, if we place our trust in God, He will provide, regardless of the circumstances.

And secondly, we should live our lives every day of the week in a manner worthy of the Gospel of Christ.

May it be so!

Alan Rickard