

“A ransom” – the price paid to redeem a slave. Jesus had come “to save his people from their sins” (1.21), “to seek and to save what was lost” (Lk. 19.10). His is the ultimate service that we receive to become part of the Kingdom.

**Reflect:**

- To what extent does our society value status rather than service? What are our expectations of our political leaders? What are their expectations?
- Ransom – the price paid for our freedom. Reflect on the self-giving of Jesus as our Ransom. In what ways have we been bound, needing to be set free? How does the death of Jesus achieve this for us?
- As redeemed people how should we regard status and service in the life of the Kingdom?



## Five Lenten Studies

by Peter J Blackburn

### *2. Kingdom Service*

**Reading: Matthew 20.1-28**

A group of children have been playing in the school ground. A bell rings. It is time for the classes to begin. The teacher insists that they form a line and enter the room in an orderly manner. A simple request, but some pushing and shoving begins – a tussle to be first in line.

Shoppers are massed outside the closed doors of the department store. It is the beginning of the annual sale. Catalogues have been distributed throughout the community. There are some very significant bargains – if you are there soon enough. The doors open and the jostling crowd pushes through and fans out inside the shop – the push to be first.

Birds have a “pecking order”. Animals fight for dominance – to be “top dog”. As human beings, many of us just settle down to allow others to fill first place. We aren’t meant to be crushed down to a sense of insignificance. But who is courageous enough to choose to “play second fiddle”?

**Reflect:**

- To what extent do we see the pattern of domination and submission running through our society?
- Which does our society rate more highly: authority or service? Why is this so?

**Study 3. Repent and Believe.** Reading: Matthew 21.12-32

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## Generous Grace

**Read: Matthew 20.1-16.**

This parable isn't an instruction on how to manage a work force! The union movement and our whole system of industrial arbitration would be offended by the situation and uphold the cause of those hired first. The injustice of the landowner screams out at us – as it undoubtedly did for the first hearers.

Such, of course, was the purpose of Jesus. We are meant to be offended – and then to reflect on the generous grace of God.

Our relationship with God is unearned – we are saved by grace, not works. Our service is a response to the gracious call of God and doesn't earn us a superior place in heaven. Because of God's generous grace, all who believe get a "superior place". The thief on the cross – turning to Jesus moments before death – receives as much as those who would devote years of their life in service. All are called to faith. All are called to as much service as they can give. All receive in full measure the gift of eternal life.

"So the last will be first, and the first will be last" (v. 16). This is because, from the standpoint of God's grace, there is no "first" and no "last". Such an outlook comes from our human organisation of things in terms of rights and justice.

### Reflect:

- "The injustice of the landowner screams out at us". Does it? Why?
- What do we learn from this parable about service and grace?

## Status and Service

**Read: Matthew 20.17-19.**

Jesus is reminding his disciples of what he told them in Caesarea Philippi. Even the Son of Man's "service in the vineyard" would be cut short.

Did they understand even now? Were they ready for the promise, "On the third day he will be raised to life!"?

**Read: Matthew 20.20-27.**

Had James and John and their mother understood the parable of the workers in the vineyard? Did they grasp what Jesus was saying about his death? It would appear not.

James and John wanted the positions of importance in the Kingdom. They got their mother to make the request. That didn't stop the indignation of the other disciples.

"You don't know what you are asking. Can you drink the cup I am going to drink? (v. 22). Later, in Gethsemane, we hear Jesus praying, "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will" (26.39). It was to be the cup of suffering and death. At the very thought, Jesus was "sorrowful and troubled" (vv. 37-38). Yet back in our reading the two sons of Zebedee boldly and unhesitatingly answer, "We can" (20.22).

Perhaps they were hoping for a cup of celebratory honour in the Kingdom feast. But yes, they will drink a cup of suffering, yet, Jesus says, "to sit on my left and right is not for me to grant" (v. 23). Jesus wouldn't usurp the Father's authority. At Golgotha, two criminals would be on his left and right – one repentant, the other cursing. In the Kingdom, "the last will be first, and the first will be last" (v. 16).

Humanly, we place so much store on status and authority. "Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave..." (vv. 26-27).

True greatness is humble service. This is the very example of the life of Jesus himself – "just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (v. 28).