

A LESSON IN ECONOMICS

Jesus stood up and started to walk away from the patch of shade where they were resting. 'Where are you going?' they wanted to know.

'To the market,' he called back over his shoulder. 'Anyone coming?'

They all struggled to their feet. 'I can't think why,' grumbled Judas. 'We don't want to buy anything and we've nothing to sell.' Peter sighed; it was cool up on the hill and the town would be hot and noisy, but what else could they do but go along with him? They had nowhere else to go.

It was late in the afternoon when they arrived in the town, and only a few abject labourers hung around at the corner of the market place still hoping to be hired. 'Poor devils,' said James. 'Not surprising no one wants them: look how thin they are. You wouldn't get more than a couple of hours' worth of work out of any of them.'

'There's hardly that much time left now anyway,' said Jesus.

At that moment a young man hurried up and began to inspect the sorry little group of men. He was well dressed and evidently well fed – not the sort of employer likely to hire such inadequate casual labour. 'Are you lot all that's left?' he asked. When they nodded he showed them a coin worth a day's wage and said, 'Then go and work in my vineyard for the rest of today for one of these.'

The men's eyes lit up as they straightened their backs and tried to appear capable. The young man pointed them in the direction of his estate and watched them shuffle off down the road.

Jesus' friends looked at each other in surprise. 'I'm minded to offer my own services for that,' said John. 'I wonder what he pays for working in the heat of the day.' The young man heard him and said, 'Then let me tell you, although you don't look in much better shape yourself. I pay the same coin to those I hire in the morning, and to those I hire at noon, and to those I hire now. It's a fair wage for a day's work, wouldn't you say?'

'Yes,' John agreed, 'and more than fair for what's left of today.'

'Is it? But would it be fair to send a man away without enough to buy bread for his children when he looks half starved himself?'

John was silent. Peter said, 'Maybe, but I doubt whether those who started work this morning will think it fair. You might find when they get paid the same that you have a riot on your hands.'

The young man laughed. 'That's their look out,' he said. 'They all knew that was the deal.'

Jesus was impressed by the man and said, 'My friend, what you are doing is good. To be generous with a clear conscience must be better than to eat well yourself with a hard heart.'

There were audible murmurs that the young man would never need to choose about having enough to eat. The young man looked at them shrewdly and said, 'That's true,

of course. I can afford to pay well, to eat well myself and to support my family. But sleep well? That's another matter. Sometimes it troubles me when I think how well I live while there are people out there like that.' He pointed to a woman dressed in rags, squatting by the side of the road in front of an empty begging bowl. 'Just tell me how I can salve my conscience when I enjoy the good things of life while others starve.'

'Well,' said Jesus, 'you know what they say? "If thine eye offend thee, pluck it out." Only, in your case, it seems you are offended by your own riches.'

The young man frowned. 'Give it away, you mean? But if I gave everything away to the poor I should be destitute myself, my children would starve and all the labourers would go hungry too! How would that help anyone?'

'Who said pluck out both eyes?' said Jesus. 'You could try giving away everything that offends your conscience.'

The young man thought for a while. 'In a strange way,' he said at last, 'I almost envy you having so little. You don't have to choose. You don't have to worry about the grape harvest, or labourers falling sick or grumbling about their wages, or some grasping Roman authority trying to get their grubby hands on your estate ...' He broke off suddenly and, walking over to the beggar woman, dropped two coins in her bowl. She cried out for joy, unable to believe her good fortune. 'There,' said the young man, 'she will eat better than any of my servants tonight.'

Peter said quietly, 'I doubt it; she'll have to pay all that to the Temple tax.'

'Then she can think herself lucky,' said the young man. 'The Temple tax demands a great deal more than those two coins from me.'

'Maybe so,' said John. 'But you said yourself, you can afford it. For her that is probably all she has in the world.'

'Well, it will have to do,' the young man retorted, 'if I am to be generous to my labourers as well tonight.' And with that he began to walk away from the market place.

'Sleep well, my friend!' said Jesus sadly.

'He says he envies us,' said James, 'but I wouldn't mind sitting down to the sort of supper he'll have tonight.'

Jesus turned to Judas: 'You keep our common purse; is there anything in it?'

They all gathered round to watch as the few small coins were counted. 'More than I thought!' said Peter, happily. 'There's just enough there to buy bread for us today.'

'So there is,' said Jesus, taking the purse and promptly tipping the whole of its contents into the beggar woman's bowl. Then, seeing their stricken faces, he added, 'Better a clear conscience with an empty stomach than a night troubled by a full one, don't you think?'

The woman scuttled away, tears of delight running down her face, while Jesus laughed with pleasure. 'You sleep well, too!' he called after her. Then he turned to the others: 'Cheer up, friends! Have faith: we shall think of something; we've never starved yet.'

