

One of the few things I remember from primary school was that a parable was an earthly story with a heavenly meaning. The earthly stories which Jesus told provide us with an insight into the realities of everyday life in first century Judea. He was perceptive observer of social life, of agriculture and of economics.

In one of his parables he tells of a farmer hiring labourers for his vineyard (Matthew 20: 1 – 16). As the day wears on he needs more workers to harvest the grapes. At the end of the day he pays each of them the same amount, whatever length of time they have worked. The amount that he would have agreed with those hired first would have been the accepted payment for a day's work, sufficient for a working man to provide for his family. In those days it was a Roman "denarius" and it was a living wage.

The parable has a "heavenly meaning": Jesus begins by saying, as he often does, "The kingdom of heaven is like..." He makes a point about the grace and generosity of God, that anyone who accepts it, whenever it may be, all benefit in the same way.

The earthly story is not being offered as model for modern wage bargaining, but it does have resonance today. Some of us may remember men waiting and hoping to be hired to work in dockyards. Now it is the phone call or text which calls people to work – or not – under a zero hour contract. The whole question of a living wage is an important one. Legislation brought in a National Living Wage of £7.20 an hour for those over 25 in April 2016. There's some inflation there: the denarius gave us the "d" with our old pennies, 240 to the pound.

It is easy for employers, especially those that rely on lower-paid workers, to see only the extra costs they will incur. They are in business to make a profit, to pay what the market expects and do not necessarily feel that they have a role in reducing poverty.

But there is a business case for tackling poverty. Research has shown that many people face financial worries which their employers are not aware of, worries which can affect their happiness, health and productivity. A survey by [Barclays Wealth Management and YouGov](#) found that:

- nearly half (46%) of employees worry about their finances
- 20% avoid thinking about finances because they find it upsetting.
- 18% lose sleep worrying about their finances.

Five per cent of employees had been absent from work for an average of 4.2 days because of illness caused by financial worries and the impact on the bottom line overall was estimated as four per cent lost productivity.

And, as the [Living Wage Foundation](#) point out:

In low paid sectors a vicious cycle of high levels of staff turnover and absenteeism can drive problems of operational inefficiency, low standards and weak productivity that hit the bottom line.

Organisations that pay the Living Wage have reported significant improvements in quality of work, reductions in staff absence and turnover, and a stronger corporate reputation.

The ability to earn a living wage, for oneself and a family, is a powerful factor in giving self-respect and confidence, especially if it means people no longer need to have their incomes topped up by the benefits system.

Jesus may have had Deuteronomy 24: 15 in mind: “Pay them their wages each day before sunset, because they are poor and are counting on it.” It is just a small detail in this story, but it shows that he was concerned for the worth and well-being of working people. Research and experience today shows a similar concern can improve the performance and profitability of business.