

***Unfair!* A Sermon on Matthew 20: 1-16 by Rev Phil Wootton**
Sunday 24 September 2023

'It's not fair!' – rings out the child's complaint. 'She's got more than me! He didn't get told off! She always gets to choose! It's not fair!' 'Life's not fair!' responds the voice of experience. 'Get used to it!' Or, if the parent or teacher concerned has not quite run out of patience, there might be a calm explanation of all the good things the child has got, and how their lot is not really such an unhappy one. At the same time, buried somewhere in the back of the adult mind, but rarely voiced, is the question of why some people seem to get all the breaks, whilst others have an endless run of bad luck. Most of us feel a bit guilty that we'd like to complain to the world, or to God: either it seems disrespectful to God, or the world would be listening.

In Jesus' parable, the vineyard workers, who'd been hired at dawn and work until dusk, have everything to complain about: 'It's not right! Those who've worked one hour paid as much as us who've worked twelve hours!' But they don't have the right to say. Those were the terms they agreed at the start of the day – and a *denarius* was the standard pay for day labourers. You could argue they should have negotiated better at the start, or all of them should have done collective pay bargaining; or that the story illustrates an unjust economic system. But the point is, the landowner got to choose how much he paid each one, and all got the same, no matter how many hours worked.

A parable of course is not a story to be taken literally. This one is not about labour disputes and industrial relations but about how God's kingdom works. But before we leave the story as it stands, it's important to ask a couple of questions, the answers to which would have been obvious to Jesus' original listeners but perhaps not to us. The questions are these: First, why did the landowner have to keep going back to the marketplace for more labourers? Surely, he cannot have so underestimated the amount of work required that he needed four times more workers than he started with? And secondly, who were these people who were left unemployed until almost the end of the day? They must have been the least employable – the very old and the very young, the weakest, the partially disabled – those no one else looked at; those who had ceased to bother to press their case, because they'd know the lot would fall elsewhere. These would be the ones left in the market square, and in a day labour system, would rapidly become the poorest of the poor. The landowner went back out of concern for them. Was it really so unfair that he gave them a full day's wage?

The landowner in this parable can stand for God because he shows the characteristics of God: above all, God's amazing generosity, God's outrageous grace; God defying the human system of meritocracy and fairness, and saying I'm going to give more than you could possibly imagine. I'm not interested in your contracts of employment. Think of covenant, the unbreakable relationship of love, I have with my people. So, God doesn't ask for a CV, or a reference, or a set of qualifications. God seeks out and saves each one as they are.

And he has work for each one as we are, even those of us who have given up on ourselves, those of us who think ourselves useless or passed it, or too inexperienced, or too muddle-headed. In God's amazing grace, there is a space for all – not all doing the same thing, but all working for the same Lord. It reminds me of some words from a liturgy of the Iona Community, which also have been turned into a song:

Gather us in, the lost and the lonely, the broken and breaking, the tired and the aching who long for the nourishment found at your feet. Gather us in, the done and the doubting, the wishing and wondering, the puzzled and pondering who long for the company found at your feet. Gather us in, the proud and the pretentious, the sure and the superior, the never inferior, who long for the levelling found at your feast.

One outcome of this all-inclusive approach is that, in the kingdom of God, we don't get a say on who are our workmates. It's God who makes the appointments, after all. Ours is to serve. In the church, we have to get past the idea that whether we say yes or no to helping with something depends on who asks us, and who else will be doing it. In our parish, hopefully we've got beyond the distinction of whether it's Good Shepherd or Christ Church – we work together. Indeed, we're still 'doing our bit for the church' if we're working for the kingdom of God elsewhere and with other people. Increasingly for the church, if we're trying to make a difference for our communities, it's about partnering with different people entirely. But if we're open to it, how very often we find that we learn most from those with whom we'd not naturally have chosen to share.

'It's not fair!' was the complaint with which I started. And I said it's not just from children. What about that slightly guilty voice in our heads that wants to complain about the unfairness of life? Should we be guilty about it? I don't think so. If we're complaining, it's because we haven't lost the inner sense that the world should be just and fair to all. Our desire to rant and rage against it means we haven't given up that faith. If we go back in the Bible to the Book of Psalms, and follow the Psalmist's example, we bring our complaints time after time to God – 'Why do the wicked prosper? Why do my enemies keep winning? How long, O Lord – will the agony last for ever?' But don't let it become a general whinge. Keep before you in your prayers that God is just and true and righteous, even if experience on the ground doesn't look like it. What happens in many Psalms (echoed in many people's experience) is that there's a twist part way through. What the Psalmist finds is that at some point something clicks. Some inner knowledge of God is revealed. Somehow, the cry of complaint turns to a song of praise. That's also what happens with poor old Job. After 35 chapters of complaints and platitudinous answers by his so-called friends, Job never gets an explanation for his unmerited suffering, but he gets infinitely more. God speaks out of the storm. Job is confronted with the mystery and majesty of God, and somehow, all is transformed.

Life in this world is unfair, there's no getting round it. We are all too used to it. But bringing the whole of life to God means we might just glimpse the outrageous grace of God that gathers us all in, and transforms all things. What we take as unfairness may turn out to be a sign of the extraordinary generosity of God.