

It's not fair! (Matthew 20:1-16)

“It’s not fair!” How many times have you heard that? And how many times have we actually said those words?

We often hear them from children, who seem acutely aware from a very early age what is fair and unfair. And they are prepared to call out unfairness when they see it, especially if they feel they are the ones being unfairly treated. And honestly, to what extent do we grow out of that, even if we change how we draw attention to it?

Jesus’ story about the workers in the vineyard is about fairness or unfairness. The owner of the vineyard goes out into the market square to hire workers. He agrees with them how much he is going to pay them for their work. He does this early in the morning, then at 9 o’clock, 12 noon, 3 o’clock and again at 5 o’clock. Nothing wrong with that!

It's at the end of the day that the problems start. The workers come together to collect their pay. And each is given what had been agreed. The discontentment comes when those who have worked from dawn and how have worked longer, feel that they deserve more than the workers who began at 5.00 pm. (Either that, or those who started later should receive less.)

You can almost hear their protest – “It’s not fair!”

It raises the question – what is fair? Is it that everyone should be paid the same hourly rate for their work? Is it that each worker should be paid the rate for the work that was agreed before they started, regardless of what others are being paid?

It raises issues of worth and equality in the workplace, especially when there are regular reports of people being disadvantaged because of their gender or the colour of their skin. And that most definitely is wrong!

But, I think that looking at the story from that aspect is to miss the point.

The landowner challenges the workers who were hired first – “Are you envious because I am generous?” (v 15). The answer is obviously ‘yes’, even though they may not have said it out loud.

Generosity is the key.

The amazing thing is that God is not fair. In fact, by worldly standards, it is the opposite. God is grossly unfair. But what God is though, is generous.

Comparing ourselves with others can lead to a sense of entitlement and wanting have a proper differential reflecting people’s the level of service, seniority and effort. But the kingdom of God isn’t like that. It is about responding and belonging, not about earning recognition or reward.

Sunday 20th September 2020

(This would have been a hard lesson to the Jewish Christians who were the first hearers of Matthew's Gospel, as they were having to come to terms with the Gentile (non-Jewish) Christians who had been grafted onto the people of God, without first having to become Jews.)

But there is no entitlement in God's kingdom, otherwise none of us would find a place. Instead, there is generosity, reward and God's grace.

In God's kingdom, life's normal pecking order is thrown out. Instead, "the last will be first, and the first will be last".

And we are left with the challenge to follow an unfair God (at least, be human standards). To look at the world with God's eyes, to listen to the world with God's ears, and to care with God's generosity, God's compassion and God's grace.

Prayer for the Week

May the generosity of God inspire us,
and the justice of God encourage us.
Help me, Jesus, to be more than fair,
showing the tender compassion of God
who created and redeemed us. Amen.

(adapted from Roots)
