
The Fairness of God

Sermon • Rev'd John Shoaf • 24 September 2023

Exodus 16:2-12 • Philippians 1:21-30 • Matthew 20:1-16



May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts give glory to you, O Lord. Amen.

Today's Gospel passage is a cautionary tale. It speaks to the natural instincts of human beings, imperfect as we are. It speaks to our sense of justice and fair play, two concepts which, I think, are central in our makeup as Kiwis (and in my case, of Americans). We want to be treated the same, to receive the same reward for the same amount of work. We don't like it when we think someone else has gotten something which we ourselves deserve but didn't get.

It's a simple story: a vineyard owner hires labourers to work in his vineyard. He hires them in separate groups, at different times during the day. A labourer at the time could expect one denarius for a day's work; that was considered a fair rate of pay. You wouldn't get rich on it, but you could live on it.

By the way, a Roman denarius was originally named because it contained 10 asses, funnily enough — an as was a smaller coin, and the word denarius means “containing ten.” So a denarius was worth ten asses. (It would be a great Scrabble

word, if there weren't already a word spelled a-s!) By the time of Christ's incarnation, the denarius had been revalued to be equivalent to 16 asses. It was a silver coin containing almost four grams of nearly pure silver. Denarii (the plural of denarius) were used until the 3rd century AD.

So the workers, whom the vineyard owner found waiting around in the marketplace, hoping to be hired, were perfectly happy to go off and work on the promise of one denarius. But at the end of the day, when the workers who had been hired at 9 am, and the ones who had been hired at noon, and the ones hired at 3 and 5 o'clock, were all paid one denarius each, it caused a bit of trouble. "Unfair!" charged the 9 am hires. "We worked longer; we should be paid more."

Are they right? Are they being treated unfairly? The vineyard owner says no, he contracted with the workers for the standard rate, and that's what he's paying. He just wanted to be generous with the later-hired workers. But the 9 am hires don't see it that way, and I expect that if this scenario happened today, there would be the same reaction. As the employer, you might even fall afoul of current labour laws. It seems to be our human nature, these days more than ever, to insist on equal treatment for everyone, and fairness is important.

But Jesus, of course, is speaking of something bigger than just a day's work picking grapes. He is talking about his Father, our God, and the coming kingdom of heaven. In the years immediately following Jesus' life here on earth, the Christian Church was established and began to grow, ultimately to reach most of the world. Think of those first Christians — Hellenised Jews who decided to follow Christ and reject a number of the teachings they were raised in. Think of Paul and Peter and the other disciples, who came to faith in Christ before anyone else, and then went out into the world to establish churches and teach this new faith. And think of all those who began to believe, and filled the new churches which Paul spent so much time writing letters to. Were Paul and Peter better or more deserving than the later disciples they made? Were all those Christians from the 2nd, 3rd and 4th centuries more valuable to God than the ones from, say, the 15th century? or the ones who became Christians just last week?

The answer is of course no. God created us all equally, and will treat us equally, based on our faith. Jesus, who will judge us all some day in the future, will treat the modern disciples no differently from the ancient ones. We will be judged on faith, and on how we have responded to God's call on us. Have we used the gifts God gave us in God's service, and in service to our fellow human beings? Have we held onto Jesus' two greatest commandments, to love God with all our heart and soul and mind and strength, and our neighbour as ourselves? If we have, we will receive the reward of eternal life in God's presence.

Fairness, in this case, is decided solely by God. Like the vineyard owner, God will do what God will do. We owe our very being to God, and do not always understand

why God does things in a certain way. God's will be done, as it is best for us and the world. Truly, the 9 am hires were not treated unfairly, and the later hires were not privileged over them. They all got the same reward. God alone decides what the reward will be — we have no say in it. But God lets us know what he wants of us, and that should be enough.

This parable also reinforces the important lesson that we cannot earn our way to heaven. Grace is given freely, or not given, just as God decides. Note that all the workers responded to the vineyard owner and went into the fields when asked to. None of them refused. They all answered the call. Just so should all of us answer when God calls, whenever that is. And whenever it is, it is always the right time, for it is God's time. I occasionally feel jealous of my colleagues who went into ministry early in their lives, right after university. I did not become a priest until I was already over 50 years old. Thirty additional years in the church I might have had! But I believe that God called me at the right time, and that there is a good reason for my not being a priest for all those years. When I was called, I answered as best I could, and will continue to serve as long as I am called. It is not a special virtue in me; it is simply understanding of how God works — well, understanding a little of how God works.

So the parable works on several levels: we cannot earn our way into heaven, and so whatever reward we do receive is entirely due to the grace of God. It does not matter whether we are new Christians or old; God loves us all and treats us all equally. And we should always be ready to answer God's call, whenever it comes, early or late. God is the final, and fair, judge of us all. God cannot be unrighteous, by his very nature. Praise God for the many blessings and unending love which we receive. Amen.