

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in thy sight o Lord; my strength and my redeemer.

Throughout scripture the drama unfolds in cultivated gardens, in rocky mountains, in broad rivers, parched wilderness, and in the busy streets of small towns.

The land is all we have to keep us alive and we are utterly dependent upon it, and it is this relationship between people and the land, that we explore in the creation season.

The land contains our identity. It contains our promise for the future and during lockdown, certainly in the west, we have been made to realize how little we have valued our green space, and how dependent we are on the land.

Combine lockdown with the extraordinary climatic and weather variations of this year, with new data on global warming and mass extinctions, and horrific climate statistics emerging every day, and there is never a day when we can say that we didn't realize that the land - our world - is in the process of rapid change; a change that is the result of the change in relationships between human communities, and the land on which they are dependent.

All our creationtide gospels focus in some way on that relationship, since Jesus uses clear themes drawn from rural Galilee and from its people, throughout his ministry, and he continually draws on those people on the social, financial, and ethical borders of life, often the rejected of society. These readings which deal with landowners, tenants, laborers, unforgiving servants, and generous masters, focus on how the land, how the environment is managed, and how it is worked, and today's parable, a curiously irritating story of the laborers in the vineyard, addresses this world of work: land ownership, laborers, tenants, unforgiving servants, and generous masters. And I don't know about you but I can never hear the story without seeing in my mind's eye one of the first laborers to be employed saying, after he has received the same payment as the late comers, "but that's not fair". And this is a parable which has puzzled many. The dominant metaphor is clearly the land as God's vineyard, and those who work it as his people, including landowners, tenant farmers, and slaves, but one of the most significant issues to be explored is surely the notion of what *is* fair. Are there always going to be winners and losers in God's world? Does someone always have to have less in order that someone else may have more? And is there any way that we can even things out?

In what way can we be fair to the underprivileged, the underclass, the apparent losers in life's lottery? It is manifestly not fair that I have so much and others have so little. It is not fair that I eat well and others don't eat at all. It is not fair that I have so many food choices and others have no food. I try to even things up by tinkering with my lifestyle, arguing that if everyone was equally committed, then together we'd build a fairer world, but what serious sacrifices am I prepared to make to ensure that fairness and equality for all, and these are the questions of the creationtide gospels and today's lesson, lesson on fairness, focuses specifically on wages and employment.

We hear the grumbling of the workers as they question the sense of fairness, of justice, in paying the last workers the same as the first. But our innate sense of fairness tends to be somewhat egocentric. We tend to assess fairness in terms of what seems fair, not only *to* us, but *for* us. We tend to measure fairness in terms of our own wants, and needs, and hopes, and of our expectations, often with little, or at least secondary regard, for the needs and wants of others.

In Jesus's day it was tough to be a day labourer. These are the people with no regular employment; they must stand in the town square hoping that some landowner or manager who needs extra work done will hire them. But there were usually more workers than work, and no unemployment or

social services to fall back on. So if you were both healthy and lucky, you get chosen and you work a 12-hour day and when you're done you receive a day's wage that would provide food for your family for the next day, and this by the way shed some insight into the practical earnestness of Jesus's prayer: give us this day our daily bread. But if you were unlucky, or unhealthy, you'd be passed over, possibly waiting all day, only to return empty-handed and hungry, to face the disappointed looks of those who depended on you. And this is by far from being an outdated employment model; it's still widespread, especially in the developing world, and here in the UK we call it zero hours contracts, the GIG economy, and we expect its laborers to be contacted via their phones rather than a street corner. The impact of COVID on the million or so insecure UK workers on such contracts has left many facing sharp losses of income, and falling through the safety net as a result of inconsistencies in employment practices, or delays in applying for grant payments. And this kind of employment, whether in Jesus' day or ours, makes you really vulnerable without a safety net. During this current epidemic nearly one third of lower paid employees in the UK have lost their jobs or been furloughed. Five and a half million people now on universal credit. The virus has laid bare Britain's insecure, and deeply unfair, work practices in many different ways, and they need fixing.

In the parable Jesus tells, everyone gets lucky as a result of an act of generosity, but this sets up expectations and resentments, although the landowner reminds them that in fact it's totally fair: everyone is being paid just what was promised. If anything the landowner is being more than fair actually extremely generous to those who were invited late in the day as well as perfectly fair to those who were fortunate enough to be called to work early. Why then begrudge such generosity? Why indeed? Except, that perhaps it's an unpleasant facet of human nature. We are inclined to understand and assess our lives, not through the abundance we've been given by God, but instead by what we feel we still lack. And because of this gnawing sense of lack, we define ourselves over and over against others, comparing and begrudging their good fortune because it wasn't our good fortune.

Think for a moment what this does to the grumbling day laborers. Rather than feeling fortunate to have found work for the day, they feel unfortunate for not having received more. Rather than rejoicing that these other workers, who waited all day for the prospect of work, can return home able to feed their families, they begrudge them their good fortune. And rather than be grateful to the landowner, who's given them an honest day's pay for an honest day's work, they grumble with resentment.

There is an existential dimension to this story that speaks as truly to our own day, time and lives as it ever did to Jesus' original audience, because this parable lays before each and every one of us a series of choices as clear as can be. When we look at our lives, do we count our blessings, or our misfortunes? Do we pay attention to the areas of plenty in our lives, or what we perceive we lack? Do we live by gratitude or by envy? Do we look to others in solidarity and compassion or see them only as competition?

And the killer thing about this is that the choices are really as unavoidable as they are simple. You cannot be grateful and envious at the same time. So which is it going to be?

Where things are unfair, God's people ought to be at the forefront of trying to make things right. When unfair things happen and people get hurt, we ought to be the first responders, offering them mercy and healing.

For God understands unfair and voluntarily experiences it himself; all you have to do is to look at the cross. The unfair treatment Jesus suffered there may not help us understand the mysteries of

life's unfairness that we go through, but it should make us determined to do something about them.
Amen.