

Matthew 20:1-16

Katherine and I have three children, one daughter-in-law and one soon to be son-in-law. Our children are now adults, at least they are adults most of the time, I am sometimes heard to mutter to myself that it really is time one or the other actually grew up.

When it comes to Christmas and Birthdays, we are scrupulously fair to each of them. Whatever the budget is for one is the same for another – at least, very very nearly. Occasionally one or the other might have a tiny bit more spent on them, but if that happens Katherine (because let's be honest, she organises all this) tries to balance up with all the others with a bit of a thing for one and an extra for another.

I'm fairly sure you'll all be the same, you don't seem like the kind of people to have favourites.

The idea of playing fair is deeply embedded in our culture. I'm glad to say that male and female clergy are paid identical amounts, but that still isn't the case in some industries.

Fairness is taught to us right from our earliest days. Be fair. Share equally.

That's why today's parable, told by Jesus, really goes against the grain for so many hearing it.

It just doesn't seem right. It just doesn't seem fair.

I don't reject the whole of the story by any means...until the end I'm really quite enjoying it.

First thing. The vineyard is an illustration that had long been used to speak about God's people, God's kingdom. So in the story the landowner must be God.

God goes out seeking those who are not in his kingdom and inviting them to come and be a part of it. Anyone who comes joins in the work of the kingdom.

So far so good until it comes to the outcome. They all get the same wages. What? That just isn't fair. I'm on the side of the people who were hired first thing in the morning and had worked all day.

What kind of kingdom is God's kingdom that can seem so unfair?

Today we christen Dexter and Maddox. I'm not going to ask more of a blessing for one than the other. And if God's kingdom is unfair, parents might be thinking hold on...what are getting deeper into??

The story Jesus told is deliberately shocking and it's just like another of his shocking stories, the one about the two sons.

The younger son cannot wait for his father to cash his chips he wants the inheritance right now! Bizarrely, his father gives him the money and off he goes to a far-off land. While he's there, he spends like there's no tomorrow and parties hard...right up until he discovers there is a tomorrow, and he comes to his senses.

He goes home, genuinely penitent and remorseful. The outstanding part of that story is that he is welcomed back by the father and given honour and status.

The older brother though is outraged, the same as the workers in today's story.

It's not fair!! I've stayed here slaving away, no special treatment for me! I haven't wasted a penny, but when your son the absolute waster comes home you throw a party.

The economy of God's kingdom really is an upside-down economy that's for sure. What is it Jesus is seeking to teach, by so irritating us with the unfairness of the wages to the workers and welcome home of the prodigal son?

God's love and forgiveness and acceptance cannot be earned. His generous welcome is for everyone at whatever stage they encounter Him.

The same blessing of eternal life is given to the person who has faithfully served in the church their whole lives as it is to the person who only finds faith at the last moment.

Remember the thief on the cross. He knows he's getting his deserved punishment, and he asks for Jesus to remember him. Jesus promises him a place in paradise.

Father God is outrageously generous.

IF the story has been that the landowner only had a certain amount and docked the wages of the first workers in order to pay something to the last workers, it would have been a very different story because the landowner would have broken his promise to pay them a day's wage.

God doesn't break his promises. He does though offer his grace to all equally, whether they feel they have lived a life of service or not.

In the other story I mentioned, the older brother refuses to go into the party. He's bitter and angry. He never really understood his father at all. He never discovered everything was already his. He's so fixated on thinking that's he'd earned his right to inherit, he misses completely how generous and gracious his father is.

By stories such as these Jesus tried to overturn the notions people had about God and God's kingdom.

The people who thought they were first in the line, Pharisees who kept every single little, tiny law in exhausting fashion and rich people who ostentatiously gave great wads of money in the temple, to them Jesus says "you who think you are first...your last".

And those people who felt the kingdom of God could never be theirs because of how badly they'd messed up, found they could repent and be welcomed. Jesus said, "those people who are last, they're first...they are getting into the kingdom ahead of you".

In the song we sang right at the beginning, the end of the chorus was "teach me Lord to walk with you".

When you seek to walk in step with God, you find his crazy generosity and grace start to challenge your own rigid notions of fair and right. You learn that humility is preferable to status, and mercy and kindness overcome prejudice.

The way of faith is the way Emily and Jake would like to show to Dexter and Maddox. They may follow closely, they may wander from it, but when the roots of faith go deep, they will know of a welcoming and generous heavenly father whose generosity and grace are beyond anything we think we might ever earn or deserve.

Rev. Jon Hutchinson, 24 September 2023