

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost Year A (20 September 2020)**Lectionary Reading:** Matthew 20:1-16

We human beings tend to like things that are fair. Outcries of “that’s not fair” may be heard most often from children, but adults can also have strong feelings about fairness, especially if we think that we’re the ones getting the short end.

By now most of you know me well enough to know that I am something of a sporting tragic.... Even as we draw to the close of the AFL season I am already looking forward to the summer of cricket that lies ahead – indeed I’ve been enjoying watching cricket for a couple of weeks now, England’s series first against West Indies, then Pakistan and more recently Australia!

As a family we are great supporters of the Scorchers, and who wouldn’t be. To this point the Scorchers are the most successful team in BBL history, winning three championships and coming runners up twice.

Before the competition moved to Optus Stadium we enjoyed many a time watching the Scorchers from the green banks of the WACCA ground, blankets, and picnic at hand. The only problem of course is that this was a general admission area with no seating, and so to get a good spot as close to the front as possible we would have to get there incredibly early...and that we often did. There was many a time we would be sat waiting by the gates at the front of the queue for a good few hours long before they opened.

Imagine then our annoyance or should I say my annoyance when other people were allowed through for whatever reason, or another gate was opened before ours, and the mad dash to secure the best spot began. Dave and the girls can testify that on more than one occasions I could be heard to clearly mutter “that’s just not on, that’s not fair, we got here first!”

“It’s not fair” could easily be the title of the parable in today’s gospel reading from Matthew. It was certainly the exclamation of those in the story who had worked hard all day and endured the heat of the sun only to be paid the same as those who arrived just before quitting time?

I don’t know about you but this parable certainly leaves me feeling a little puzzled and even a little put out. There can be no getting away from the fact that this parable seems anything but fair.

Surely the laborers, who were hired last and only worked one hour in the vineyard, should earn one-twelfth the wages of those, who worked from sun-up to sundown. Or else, then, all things being fair, the ones who worked and sweated all day long should get their day’s wages plus a big, fat bonus in their pay envelope. That’s what we expect to happen in this story but that’s not what we get in the end.

To assume either one of those scenarios, however, is to start at the wrong place. One of the foundational beliefs of our culture is that a person should get what he or she deserves. In other words, we are ingrained with the notion that you do an honest day’s work for an

honest day's wage; and, if you don't, then you won't! That's just how it is in the world. But, to read Jesus' parable with that kind of good business mindset dooms us from the start – why? – because this story isn't about a good business practice, fair labour laws or a lesson in economics. Instead, this parable of the labourers in the vineyard is all about God and what the kingdom of heaven is like.

That's where we need to begin this story! Anything else is starting at the wrong place.

The truth is that the landowner did no wrong. He did not cheat the all-day workers. He hired them early in the morning to work in his vineyard for the usual daily wage, and they were paid the going rate for the usual daily wage – no surprise there and certainly no cheating either.

While we scratch our heads and wonder about the inequity of it all, Jesus wants us to see that the landowner was not trying to be fair, he was trying to be generous. He wasn't giving the workers their pay because of merit; he was giving them their pay out of compassion. The owner gave each worker a day's wage – enough to feed and take care of a family.

The point of this parable is about how God's grace and mercy are at work in the world, instead of what's fair or who's deserving – it offers yet another glimpse of what God and the reign of God is like—

After all the workers had been paid, and paid the same usual daily wage, the folks who had worked all day long grumbled against the landowner. The landowner got wind of their complaints and answered them by saying, "Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?"

These words of the landowner overlap in our minds with the words of the father in the parable of the prodigal son. Refusing to join in the celebration for his younger brother, who's come back after "devouring the Father's property with prostitutes," the elder brother complains: "Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command" (Luke 15:29). And the father, who has never given him even a goat, orders that the fatted calf be killed for that good-for-nothing boy! Isn't it reminiscent of the first worker's complaint that the landowner made the last ones equal to those "who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat"?

Growing up with my twin sister I was often considered the "good one - the reliable one" not that my sister was particularly bad in any way! I always sought to please my parents and I remember in particular when in our mid-teens my father set a rule that we had to be home by 10 pm if we went out. I would always make sure I was home by 9pm but invariably my sister would never be home before 11pm. I can still clearly recall the angst it caused me, knowing that my father would be upset.... I can't remember exactly when, but some years later I came to the realisation that in

spite of this of course my sister was not loved any less by my father and it was quite a sobering thought!

That's how God loves us, each and every last one of us. God gives us what we need – divine grace and mercy – and God holds nothing back. No one is deserving, and, certainly no one is more deserving than some others. We all have need, and by the grace of God, God will meet those needs.

It becomes quite clear by story's end that, yes, God is in charge! And, God's ways are not our ways. If God chooses to love us all and be generous to all of us, that's God's business. It's not ours to decide who's in or out, who is deserving or not.

The vineyard in the parable is the kingdom of God, a world that is totally different from ours. It is a world where "comfortable expectations are withdrawn, and the unexpected prevails."

Through the parable, Jesus enjoins those who were called first to comprehend the world into which they have been invited, and to join him in inviting the last ones -- the sick, the poor, the women, the latecomers, the unimportant -- instead of comparing and complaining.

When we start in the right place with the grace of God and we, in turn, follow Jesus by being gracious, inclusive, and welcoming to all others, then we end up right where God intends for us to be. God is not fair, and that is a good thing, instead he is overwhelmingly generous!

The Lord be with you...