

Sept 20<sup>th</sup> 2026, St Luke's

## Matt 20:1-16

### What is Fair?

When I was young, we all knew how to divide the last banana, or the last piece of cake, or whatever it was, fairly. One simple rule; 'You cut, and I'll choose.' It worked a treat. A generation later, and our own children instinctively knew that the really important jobs in life, like pushing the pedestrian button at the crossing, require taking turns. And if no-one remembers whose turn it is; two seconds of 'paper, scissors, rock' will settle it.

On becoming an adult, things got more complicated. We learnt that life isn't fair. But we still carry a sense that it should be. That's why some of us might find Jesus's story about workers in the vineyard to be a tad unsettling. -It doesn't seem fair.

Like most of Jesus's parables, it encourages us to identify with one of the characters or, as in this case, a group of them. We have the early comers, the late arrivals, and those in between. Who would the original hearers have identified with? These were among the first disciples who had got in on the ground floor. They cast in their lot with Jesus before he attracted a major following. They also all belonged to the wider Jewish family, who had the Scriptural background knowledge to put the Messiah into context. I reckon they would have identified with the early workers, the ones who started at 6am.

What about us? I think many of us would also tend to fit ourselves into a 'long-established' category. Perhaps we can trace our Anglican or other denomination credentials back a generation or three. Perhaps we've always been in a church, and we know how things work. Being part of a favoured minority was certainly true also for the Philippians Paul wrote to. They were proud to be part of establishing a Roman rampart in the outer provinces, showing inhabitants of the far-flung regions how things should be done. For us too, if we're secure in our identity, we're well-placed to climb life's ladders. But that doesn't make us more deserving, and that's where the early vineyard workers in the story may have come unstuck.

The market-place had an area which functioned as a labour exchange; a place where people wanting work today might gather and hope for the best. These day-workers, with no fixed employer, were in some ways worse off than slaves. Slaves at least had to be fed and housed. Their fortunes might rise and fall with their household's, but they had a guaranteed minimum.

In generations to come, Christians would be active in improving work systems and organising a few safety nets, but that was still a long way off. The parable deals with gig economy workers in a world where sick leave and superannuation, let alone unemployment benefits, hadn't even been thought of. A worker's reward was

immediate, but transitory. You would likely use most of today's pay to buy tonight's or tomorrow's food.

If we'd been at that market-place wanting work, we too would have seized our opportunity. Every year at this time, the grapes had just ripened and had to be brought in within a window of perhaps only a few days before the late September rains came. Because of the urgency, the landowner offers a denarius for the day's work – that's quite good money, the same as a Roman foot-soldier got. The early vineyard workers were happy with that, and they were probably pleased later to be unexpectedly joined by some fresh workers at the last hour before dark, to help complete the job.

All went well until payment time. Then it was only comparison with others that led to discontent and protest. It's good to be happy for the benefits a life in God's kingdom brings. But making comparisons can be a real joy-killer. If you want to get ahead, so much seems to hinge on comparisons. You'd better have the confidence that you're cleverer or of more worthy descent or stronger physique than those unlucky others. That self-assurance can start very young. When John and I had our first baby, I honestly felt a bit sorry for the other new mothers I saw. It wasn't their fault of course, but our baby was just so obviously superior to theirs in every way. And when it came to playgroup, you could just tell at a glance that ours was the most intelligent child in the room. God had obviously favoured us. It took me a very long time to realise that other mothers might look at their own child in the same subjective way we did ours! In the case of parental feelings towards a baby, that blind devotion is probably there to ensure humanity's survival through the tough times. But for us as Christian adults, we are told not to confuse privilege with entitlement.

Our community here at St. Luke's is lucky enough to have people who brought us needed skills at the right times. As churches go, we can consider ourselves relatively fortunate. But that doesn't mean we get a corporate box in heaven, or that we should expect one here on earth.

Caution against ranking ourselves, assessing our comparative value, comes through in several of Paul's letters. He himself has plenty he could claim, starting with his impeccable religious ancestry and heritage. And he had an enviable track record of successful church planting. But Paul hardly mentions his achievements. If I'd planted a dozen or so congregations, you can be sure I'd mention it in my letters, just in passing. I'd make sure everyone knew about it! Not Paul. He tells everyone that for him, the only glory that counts is found in Jesus.

It all puts a different spin on fairness. The vineyard payment system could look fair only if we apply a different criteria.

The customary kind of fairness gave one of my aunts an incredibly complicated system for calculating her kids' pocket-money. They were paid differing rates according to the level of effort required to complete their particular chores; The son who mowed the lawns got more than the one who dried the dishes. They could get

additional amounts for extra one-offs, like painting the back fence or washing the car. And deductions could apply if something got broken.

She had five children, so it became quite an accounting exercise! And the kids still didn't think it was fair. Honestly, it might have been better to say, I love you all equally, you all do what you can, here's \$4 each. That latter kind of fairness, in effect, is what the employer does in the parable. Our opinion of that might change if we identify with the last group instead of the first! The later workers would probably point out that they hadn't been lazy, just unlucky not to have been taken on sooner. Perhaps they were in the wrong place. Perhaps they lost out to men who were younger and stronger. They might also point out that their families' need of food was no less than everyone else's. We're cautioned against looking sideways at people who had different entry points, partly because we simply don't know enough about other people to see them with God's eyes. Does everyone start with the same powers? Of course not. We mostly do what we can do according to the situation we find ourselves in.

Sometimes this story is seen as an expansion of the 'thief on the cross' gospel message. That man is remembered for sharing a crucifixion day with Jesus. He repented only when he was just about out of options. And sure enough, Jesus assured the thief that God would receive him into eternal life.

The gospel often reminds us that those most aware of their need might be best-placed to receive God's salvation;

Like the workers who hadn't been hired.

Like the thief on the cross.

And like others we hear of who have received Jesus only when desperate.

In the end, questions about who arrived first, who worked longest, or who achieved the most, should simply fade away. God doesn't rate us the same way as the world does. He values us because we belong to him.

As we relate to each other as fellow-saved, let all our praise go to the one who saves us!

Amen