

ALL'S FAIR

Matthew 20:1-16 [MW17-29]

Sermon preached by Rev Wayne Thornton at Mangawhai and Wellsford, Sunday 24 September 2017

What a load of rubbish!

- what a preposterous idea!!!
well, isn't it?
- that parable we've just heard
can you believe it!
who'd take it seriously ...

The idea that someone who arrives late and does an hour's work

- is paid the same as someone who has toiled all day
would you be happy with that arrangement?

Think of the repercussions for employers and pay negotiations

- this parable pulls the rug out from under the way we do things
and that's point
- this parable challenges our traditional, well-founded, *reasonable* expectations
our expectations of what is, and what is most definitely not, fair!

Let me share some background information

- in Palestine the grape harvest was ready toward the end of September
and close on its heels came the big rains
- if the grapes were not picked before the rain came, the crop was ruined
getting the harvest in was a frantic race against time

The regular wage for a 'day labourer' was a silver coin

- this was enough, just, to provide a family's needs for a day
with little or nothing to spare
- the Jewish day began at sunrise, 6am
and went till 6pm, when officially the next day began
- so those who were hired first in the parable
would have begun work soon after six in the morning

And a word in defence of all those men standing doing nothing in the marketplace

- they were not lazy or unwilling
the marketplace was the 'labour exchange'
- a man arrived first thing in the morning with such tools as he possessed
and waited for someone to hire him
- naturally those who were young or strong or skilled were the first to be hired
each time anyone went to the marketplace to hire workers
they would take the "best of the rest"
- every man who was there was keen to work
the fact that some of them stood even until five o'clock in the evening
when there was only one hour of work remaining
shows just how desperate they were

These men in the marketplace were hired labourers – the lowest class of workers

- life for them was at best precarious
even servants and slaves could expect to be fed and housed
- these day-labourers were entirely at the mercy of chance employment
there were no 'benefits' of any kind
if they had no work for even a day, children would go hungry at home
- to be unemployed for a day was disaster ... long term it meant starvation

Now the employer in the parable seems a reasonable man

- he agrees with the first group of workers the regular wage
in return for a day's work
- with the next group hired he agrees a fair wage
twice more he does the same thing
- perhaps he has more work than he thought, perhaps the rains are coming
perhaps he is a compassionate man
- the labourers were only too pleased to get any job
not stopping to worry why or even what they would be paid
- then the last group are hired just an hour before "knock off time"
they would be the 'least able' group
what work they could do in an hour
would be of questionable value for any employer

Most of those hired later in the day would have had little expectation

- of finding work that day
having found work they would probably have expected to be paid proportionately
- half a day worked, half the regular wage paid
quarter day worked, quarter wage paid
and who knows what those taken on at five o'clock would have expected!
- so imagine their surprise, relief, joy - when they were paid a silver coin
a full day's wage each
- was that fair?

So imagine what those who were hired first must have thought

- when they saw what the latecomers were paid
probably they did not begrudge this payment
it showed the employer was a generous and charitable man
- however in light of what those hired last were paid
those hired first would probably have expected some kind of "bonus"
some kind of recognition for the full day's work they had done
- that seems reasonable, that seems at the very least, fair

Have you ever picked grapes or worked long hours harvesting in the heat?

- when I was at university I used to work on an orchard during the summers
I had two friends who were grape harvesting
- sometimes I would see them after work
I was tired, hot, dusty and aching – but compared to my friends I was fresh!
they knew about exhaustion, about heat, about aching backs

Put yourself in the place of those first hired workers

- you've been working nearly 12 hours, your back is killing you
your feet ache, your fingers hardly bend anymore
mouth and throat dry, clogged with dust
- you are totally, totally exhausted and ready to drop, you've given your all
every time you close your eyes all you see are grapes
- but the day is over and your family will eat
your children will smile and maybe there will even be a little wine tonight

As you line up to be paid

- someone notices those workers who arrived barely an hour ago
are getting a silver coin each
- there is an excited murmuring: what will you get?
two silver coins? surely not three? maybe some grapes to sell for yourself?
an offer of more permanent work ...

You stretch out your hand in eager anticipation and receive ...

- one silver coin ... one silver coin!?
of course you are angry
- not even a word in recognition of that extra work you've done
the whole day you've toiled
and you get just the same as those who did only an hour!

*"Listen, friend," says the owner a little reproachfully. "I have not cheated you.
After all, you agreed to do a day's work for one silver coin."*

If we're honest, we probably identify with those workers who were hired first

- saying something like "it's not right that everybody gets the same"
"it's not fair!"
- and that is the point
Jesus tells this parable so that at the very least
we get that the way God does things, is very different to the way we do them
- the kingdom of Heaven is based on assumptions quite different
to the assumptions about fairness and equality that come naturally to mind

The way God does things

- means that no one gets less than they deserve or thought they would get:
those first-hired workers got exactly what they agreed with the owner
- however God's way means that sometimes people get more
more than they believe they can expect or hope for
- the rewards of God are not according to what people think is their merit
how much merit can a person claim anyway in God's vineyard?
is anyone able to claim that God owes them a debt?!

You know I used to struggle, think it was definitely not fair

- that there was more rejoicing in heaven over one repentant sinner
than over ninety nine people who lead righteous lives

It didn't seem right that 'tax collectors' and 'sinners' were going into the Kingdom *first*
- then I realised I should be happy that people have found God's Kingdom
I wanted people to share the joy and love God offers through Jesus
and I genuinely rejoice when people find it

Now what I struggle with in this morning's parable
- is how those first-hired workers respond
to the owner's generosity and compassion
- did they rejoice that those who had waited so long in the marketplace
were now at peace, with money to take home to their families?
- no they did not!
they grumbled and complained

There is a yawning chasm between the values the world teaches
- and those the kingdom of heaven breaks in with:
'get in on the ground floor'
'the early bird gets the worm'
'a fair day's work for a fair day's pay'
- our notions of what is fair, what may be reasonably expected
are not just broken
- they are shattered: smashed into tiny pieces

And good job too!
- because I have realised that I will get fair treatment, a real fair go
from the God who Jesus tells me acts like the owner of the vineyard
- I have also realised that I am challenged to live by those same values
to implement them where I can
and that it will make a difference
- that seems reasonable, seems fair
or as we might say: "fair enough"!

I think this poem by James Huftstutler helps explain the "fairness" of it all
- it's called "The Body of Christ"

We are the body of Christ

*Strange,
that after all the mean things
the kids on the block called us
while we were growing up
that we should become
the body of Christ.*

*I never in a million years
would have thought that
Christ's body would have
warts and freckles
and be always slightly overweight.*

*But if it takes eyes
to see the ways people need help
and ears
to hear what somebody needs to listen to
and hands to help out
and feet
to go on those errands
and hearts to love*

*and voices
to sing and shout and holler
about how wonderful God is
and what God can do with these
eyes and
ears and
hands and
feet and
voices,
then I guess we are
the body of Christ!
God help us!*

*Funny that it's young and old
at the same time,
wise and naïve,
gentle and assertive,
completely in charge
and a little scatterbrained;
but oh so full of love.
Christ's love.*

All's fair?

- we are called to live by the principles of God's vineyard
challenging ... definitely
infuriating ... sometimes
rewarding ... ultimately

With these thoughts and reflections still fresh in our minds

- let us join in praying again the Prayer for the Week
(from Pew News and Pew Sheet)

*O God,
from your providing hand even the dissatisfied and grumbling
receive what they need for their lives.
Teach us your ways of justice
and lead us to practise your generosity,
so that we may live a life worthy of the gospel
made known through your Son Jesus Christ, our Saviour.
Amen.*