

### Unfair Love

This is one of those parables which disquietens many of us. If you came from a reasonable size family then you know that this is just not fair! Or if you have ever had anything to do with industrial relations you know that this isn't just. How come those who clock on at the last moment and who only do an hours work get as much as those who worked a whole long day in the heat?!

One of my oldest memories – I must have only been 3 and a little bit – is of things not fair! I can remember my sister, even younger than I, and I walking along behind the truck in the paddock picking up little mallee roots and giving them to Dad to put on the back of the truck. It is winter and cold in my memory and Mum is driving the truck. I remember thinking how terribly unfair it was that an adult should get to ride in the warm cab while my sister and I should have to work!! As an adult I realise that firstly an adult had to drive the truck, and secondly Mum would have been 8 months pregnant with my brother! Janet and I were probably only given a job to do to keep us out of mischief because I can't imagine that we were capable of actually prizing any sizable mallee roots loose! I presume that I am not the only one to have such memories of childhood. And try as we might as adults we have probably unwittingly left the next generation of children with similar memories. Indeed as parents we find that sometimes we have to do and give different amounts to our children in order to meet their different needs. Things are often not fair in families. Sometimes through humorous misunderstandings and sometimes things are not fair in very real and serious ways.

So is this parable simply pointing to pre-existing inequities in the human family or to something deeper and more radical? Well, probably both. In biblical times, and even today in many places, the poorest of the workers would wait around the market place hoping to be hired for the day. Whilst they did similar work to servants in many cases they did not have the security of income or housing and so they were poorer. As to who got employed on a given day it was probably due to a combination of reputation, appearance of strength and enthusiasm, and willingness to accept the wages of the day. Not too much has changed!

In this respect the parable pointed to an existing social inequity within the family of God's people. For this group, the most vulnerable, this was a parable that told of God's exceeding generosity and faithfulness for God is portrayed as a land owner who pays the living wage to all regardless of their contribution. In a community where the poor received the gleanings, the spilt seed, from the field it was indeed a generous image of God's generosity and a radical reworking of the hierarchical understanding of peoples value. Even the least of the least should receive the necessities of life.

So is this some prefiguring of a socialist state of being? I don't think that is what Jesus was getting at. Jesus was suggesting something even more radical. Jesus probably had the Pharisees in mind when he spoke of those muttering against the owner for having been so generous to the newcomers. The religiously righteous among the chosen people of God were being portrayed as receiving no more than those who had arrived late on the scene and were "last" by human standards. And Matthew is retelling it with the leadership within his community in mind.

So how do we hear this parable, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, in comfortable familiar Australia? Well, if you are like me, then you can probably identify with the different roles at different times. There are times in life, and places within me, which know that I am among the least, the Johnny come lately who has not been able to contribute as much as I wish I had and yet who gets to sit down and eat with my betters. This part of me feels variously humble, grateful, amazed, delighted. It is good to be in this place, to acknowledge that God is more generous than we deserve, that God's love and providence is not earned but given.

And as I confessed at the beginning I am deeply in touch with the unfairness of this parable. I am well and truly in the role of those who thought that they had done more than their fellow workers and therefore that they deserved more! I imagine many in the church feel this way sometimes: we spend thousands of hours in prayer and at busy bees, we put thousands of dollars in the plate and yet more cheques in the mail to all sorts of charities – and are we to only get the same amount of grace, thanks, praise, heaven, “payment” as those who turned up at the last hour, who finally get around to praying with their last breath? Where is our just God in this?

Clearly human conceptions of justice and divine graciousness are two different ways of seeing things. Human justice focuses on rights and responsibilities, on deserving and non-deserving, on needs versus wants. God's grace is always undeserved love in one sense, for we can never “deserve” God's love. God loves us, gives us our payment at the end of the day, not because we worked so many hours or did so many good deeds, but because it is the nature of God to love for God is Love.

So where is our motivation to turn up to the vineyard and work the length of the day? Why not casually saunter in at the last hour? The only reason that makes sense to me is not a moral one but the selfish reason that we get the benefit of being in God's presence the whole day, of being with the one who gives our life meaning and purpose and joy for the all of our lives, not just at the end. Having lost my mother nearly nine years ago I am aware that, as the eldest, through no merit on my part, I had 2 to 5 years more of her dear company than my siblings. Do I regret that I did more things for her, bought more presents for her, because I was around? Of course not. If I had my time over I would do more not less. As I'm sure we would each wish as we recall our loved ones. To be in the service of the God we love is a blessing and not a chore. We who are the long term faithful are not short-changed for we have had the blessing of knowing God's love all these years. And when the end of the day comes God's love will be there waiting for us. Will it be any less just because others are also loved? Of course not for God's love is not finite, it is boundless.

Maybe, even if just for a moment, we can feel ourselves in the role of the landowner and find a desire to keep on going back to market place and looking for more who are in need. Maybe we can locate that part of ourselves that desires to be as generous with the least as with the faithful long suffering workers. And maybe we will realise that if everyone does not get their needs met then it is not a celebratory pay day for any of us. God's gracious economy is not about scarcity and figuring reward and punishment. It is ridiculously generous, loving beyond all human notions of what is fair. Thank God.

Even so, come Lord Jesus Christ.