

Sermon on Wednesday 19 August

by Melanie Seward

Readings: Psalm 23; Matthew 20. 1-16

A Generous God



I wonder if you can remember any of the sayings that taught you about fairness. I remember being told: 'Take your fair share', 'Everyone needs to eat' and 'Wait until it's your turn'. Later came: 'Go on, say your piece, you have the right to be heard'. In life, we may have to compete to get a job or promotion; we discover that it can be who you know not what you know and can do. Many individuals slowly realise that they have not been paid a fair wage – perhaps being paid below the minimum wage or being paid less for being female. The watch word is 'equality', translated as 'Equal pay for equal work'. Some are backward in coming forward but may seethe inside at such unfairness, others speak up loudly for their rights.

Today's parable story told by Jesus ends with much grumbling and some very unhappy people left deciding whether to start a shouting match. Why? Because they feel they have been treated unfairly. In the story, labourers have gathered in the hope of being hired to work. Early in the morning, a local

landowner comes by and offers work to some of the men. He agrees to pay them the usual daily wage. During the day, he regularly goes back and hires additional men saying he will pay them 'whatever is right'. Finally, with one hour of the working day to go, he goes back and finds men still waiting for work and tells them to go to the vineyard. At the end of the working day, the steward or manager is sent with the instructions to pay the men, beginning with the last and ending with the first.

Now, this means that the men who have worked a full day see everyone else getting paid before receiving their wages. Imagine them thinking: 'Why are the men who came for the last hour getting the daily wage? No wonder they are happy! And the men who came before them but have done far less than us, they are getting the daily wage-surely this means we deserve more.' When they are paid the same amount, they feel hoodwinked, diddled, treated unfairly. Arguing gets them nowhere; the landowner, now called the Master, tells them: 'I have paid you what we agreed! It's my money and I choose to be generous and pay everyone the daily wage.' Had we been in their place, would we have felt the same after a day toiling in the blistering heat?

The reality was that the usual wage was one denarius - enough to feed the worker, and his dependents, at a stretch. Consider that all the workers began the day desperately needing and hoping that they would be hired in order that they can put bread on the table. Seen from this perspective, they should have been rejoicing in the good fortune of their fellow labourers, but they cannot even experience thankfulness for their ability to feed their own families.

Instead they are wrapped up in their own needs and have no compassion towards their fellow human beings.

In contrast, the Landowner or Master seems thoughtful, compassionate and, as a result, generous. In the heat of the day he repeatedly returns from the vineyard to where the labourers wait for work. He even goes back at nearly the end of the day to find men still there. It's as if he respects them for maintaining their dignity by hanging onto hope and their ability to work rather than give up. It is as if he has gone back to check that he has not left anyone without the dignity of work. Furthermore, he has gone back himself, he has not sent the steward or manager.

We are presented with a contrast between the mindsets of the landowner and of the men who think they deserve more reward: a contrast between God's way of looking at the world and the human tendency to focus on 'what I deserve' rather than what is needed for others to flourish. In the Gospels, we see a God that goes out of his way to reach out to his people. God understands their need for the richer and fuller life that he had always intended them to have. Out of compassion, he sends his Son to suffer and to die, that they and we might be offered new and everlasting life. All this because of the love and grace of God.

This parable still speaks to us today. Today, Christians still argue about what makes a person a Christian or which church is the better form of Christianity, as if some have more access or are more deserving of God's grace than others. Faith is not a competition - there are no entry requirements other than trust in God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Everyone who responds to the Good News of Jesus, and so to the love of God the Father, is loved, redeemed and forgiven and blessed with new life as a free gift of Grace - no-one earns or deserves salvation and, therefore, all are welcome and all are equal before God. The motivation is the joy at receiving this free gift and wanting others to share the love - for everyone to know the love of God.

