

When Fairness Isn't Enough!

Sermon delivered by

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May the Lord be in our hearts and on my lips, that I may proclaim the Gospel worthily and well, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

In today's Gospel, we are challenged. There is no easy way around it.

Jesus tells a story about a landowner who keeps returning to the marketplace. Each time - he looks for those who are still waiting for work. He welcomes them into the vineyard and, when evening comes, gives each one enough money to live on.

To hear this story well, we need to notice the people who are waiting for work. Day labourers, they lived from one day to the next. If they were not chosen, their families might not eat. So, they would stand in the marketplace, all day, hoping someone would see them.

In Mathews Gospel, the landowner keeps coming back. At nine o'clock, then at noon, three o'clock and finally at five o'clock. And still there are people waiting for work. When he asks why, they say,

“Because no one has hired us.” The story doesn’t tell us that they are lazy or unwilling. They had simply been passed over. And being left waiting like this, can wound more than a person’s income. It can begin to wound their sense of worth too.

At the end of the day, those hired last are paid first, and everyone receives the same daily wage—enough to live on. The first workers are angry, “You have made them equal to us.” Their frustration is understandable. The landowner doesn’t dismiss their long day; however, he insists that the needs and dignity of the later workers matter too. This is grace as daily bread: God’s gift of life, ensuring that no one goes home empty-handed.

Most of us think fairness means getting what we have earned. And often that makes sense. But Jesus asks us to look a little deeper. Is fairness enough if someone still does not have what they need to live? The first workers receive everything they were promised. What troubles them is that someone else receives enough as well. So perhaps justice is more than balancing the books. Perhaps it is also about restoring people to life, dignity, and community.

Jesus told this story in a world where just a few people held most of the wealth and power, while many struggled simply to survive. So, perhaps the parable asks more than whether we are kind as individuals. Perhaps it asks us to look at the way we live together. Who has work and security? Whose voice is heard? Who is welcomed and given a place to belong? And who is still waiting to be seen?

These questions are still with us. We are living in a world which is rapidly changing. Living costs continue to rise, there are people who are homeless and sleeping on the streets, in shelters, or in cars. There is a rhetoric of hate and division causing fear and when fear takes hold, we can be tempted to blame others who are already carrying heavy burdens—migrants, Aboriginal peoples, LGBTQI people, Muslim communities, and others pushed to the edges. But this parable calls us another way: to come closer, to listen, and to recognise Christ among those who have been left waiting.

God's grace does more than reassure us. It gently unsettles the order we have grown used to. The excluded are welcomed. The poor are blessed. Those who have been overlooked are finally seen—not as problems to solve, but as people worthy of care, dignity, and belonging.

So what might this mean for us as the church? Without meaning to, we can make belonging so much easier for those who already know the hymns, the traditions, and the way things are done.

But newcomers may arrive carrying questions, uncertainty, or a painful experience of religion. Some may have waited a long time to hear, "There is a place for you here." We are called not only to speak about God's welcome, but to live it—to become a sign of the vineyard, where people are received by grace rather than measured by how long they have belonged.

This story also speaks gently to those of us who see ourselves among the "first." These workers are not villains. They have worked hard and

endured the heat. Of course they want their effort to be noticed. But the danger comes when their sense of worth depends on being more deserving than someone else. We know that little voice in our head. “But I worked harder. I stayed longer. I gave more. Surely, I deserve more.” And perhaps Jesus asks us, gently but honestly: what is happens to us when our sense of worth depends on someone else having less?

The gospel offers us something more secure: our worth rests in God’s love, not in standing above another person. Grace frees us from that anxious comparison. It allows us to rejoice when someone else is welcomed, because our own place in God’s love was never at risk.

The parable ends with these words: “So the last will be first, and the first will be last.” Jesus is not simply rearranging the queue. Perhaps He is inviting us to imagine a community where we no longer measure human worth by productivity, status, or achievement. The elderly person, the unemployed person, the asylum seeker, the trans person the person living with disability, the newcomer, and the long-serving member all share the same God-given dignity.

Perhaps that is the invitation at the heart of this parable: a justice deeper than calculation, where everyone has enough, no one is disposable, and welcoming one person never means rejecting another. God’s kingdom is not a marketplace where we compete to prove our worth. It is a vineyard with room enough, grace enough, and welcome enough for every one of us.

So perhaps Jesus leaves us with this question. Not only, “Did everyone get what they deserved?” but, more gently, “Did everyone receive what they needed to live?” Perhaps that is where mercy and justice meet. Where dignity is restored. And where another person’s welcome can become joy for us all.

Amen.