

I wouldn't like to witness the rumpus there would be if the passage of scripture appointed as to day's gospel were put into practice just as it is! It is all about labourers brought into a vineyard an hour before sunset, that is, an hour before it was time to 'knock off', and they received precisely the same wages as the men who had been 'at it' since sunrise. I wonder what the unions would say? I know what the labourers would do. They would all queue up for work the next day at 5.0p.m. Why not? This lunatic employer gives the same pay whenever you turn up. However, the landowner, need not according to Levitical law, have paid these last employees anything. Their pay could have waited till they had worked their full stint by returning next day. Instead, the landowner exercised what he recognized as his own right to be generous. This is what evoked the resentment.

The whole story is so fantastic, so illogical, it forces you to search for a meaning. The speaker wasn't crazy. What, then, could he mean by presenting a crazy story?

I think we should begin by realizing that our notions of justice usually cannot but be influenced by our own circumstances about what we and others deserve. We insist justice has to do with equality, but a lot of the time it's a word we toss around to keep people and things we don't like at bay. Then we hear this 'awkward' parable which seems to turn all that upside down. But then we know how often Jesus does that in an attempt to shake us out of our preconceived notions.

So perhaps no other words attributed to Jesus cause as much offence to our ethical perceptions as in the parable of the labourers in the vineyard. He likens 'the kingdom of heaven', or the way things are when God sets the standards, to a situation in which hardworking, reliable people seem to get swindled. Or do they?

Well, not as far as Jesus sees why he is telling this. Because so often his parables include absurd behaviour to deliver the message, which in this case is a characterization of what it

means to call God 'righteous' or 'just'. When the landowner promises to pay 'whatever is right' his words mean 'whatever is just.'

So excessive is God's need to give and care, it seems to go against our instinct and fairness. Indeed some scholars suggest that this parable was given prominence by the early church because there were those who thought that their years of loyal service was not rewarded early enough, with perhaps a bishopric, but being set aside by younger men, who had not come up through the struggle and ranks. A message that seems to have echoed through the church ever since.

It may seem absurd to assert that since the world began men have resented God being generous, but it is true. Human nature may bring itself to the point of allowing God to be generous to itself, but only just; we are proud, we like to pay for our sins; what we cannot endure is God being generous to others. 'Why should God', complained the Jews, 'receive Christians into the same fellowship with himself when they have not borne the burden of observing God's laws as we have?' 'Why should God', complains the life-long churchgoer, receive that old sinner down the street into the presence of God as a result of his death-bed conversion? We prefer instead a God who works 'according to the book.'

So, good people, this parable reminds us that God will allow us to have what we want.

He insists on being generous. 'Surely I am free to do what I want with my own money?'

And this puts us in our place. We are forced to have the God that is, not the God we prefer.

And so, not only our pride but our jealousy is unmasked. 'Why be jealous because I am

kind?' God enquires. So the problem for us all is the grace of God. Can we take it? Can we

enter into God's presence not on the basis of our rights but on the basis of God's generosity

to each and every one of us? No wonder the Cross of Christ is a stumbling block. It gives no

credit. It grounds our eternal security not in anything that we pride ourselves as having done. There is the rub for us all in the grace of God, but unless we are prepared to suffer it we will not be in communion with God because God intends to be generous however much we grumble.

The message for us all to take away from today's parable, and to ponder on, and be reassured by it, is this. God's creation is a gift. All the loveliness of God's world we think of is a gift. Likewise salvation, the sovereign grace of God, is a gift, and when we see it like that, this seemingly illogical parable, of the Labourers in the Vineyard, we become, and will remain Christians without a proud look and high stomach, the only kind which is truly Christian. So may we all be blessed in that this week? Amen.