

A Reflection from the Revd Ali Massey for Trinity 15

In today's Gospel, Jesus is again teaching his disciples about what life in the kingdom of God is like. Jesus knows that his time is short, he will soon face humiliation and death in Jerusalem. Jesus understands that the disciples have experienced 'coming near to the kingdom of God' by being with Jesus. They have witnessed his teaching, healing and relationship with God first-hand. But now Jesus is making sure they have all the information that they will need to carry on the *Missio Dei*, the mission of God, after he has gone. So, he teaches them about the generosity of God and challenges us all to think about the difference between fairness and grace.

I imagine, that we could all tell our own version of the parable in the reading. We know people who, in our not so humble opinion, neither earned nor deserved what they got; whether that was a job, a promotion, a hike in salary, recognition, happiness, success - a hundred different things. We might sometimes feel that we have worked longer and tried harder but it didn't seem to make a difference.

It is then, that we view the world, ourselves, and others through the lens of fairness rather than the lens of grace. I wonder if that is the opposite of how God views the world and us, God's beloved children.

When we're little we are taught very firmly that fairness matters, if you watch children playing it won't be very long before someone says that's not fair! The concept of fairness is deeply ingrained in us. It is important to be fair, but sometimes, fairness is the main driver of how we act or judge another person or their circumstances. In that scenario we choose fairness over love, acceptance, mercy, forgiveness, or generosity.

One of the reasons we like fairness and have it as our default setting, is that fairness gives us a feeling of order, of predictability, of control. It also gives us a sense of hierarchy. Fairness is based on what we deserve, how hard we work, what we achieve and the way we behave.

Sometimes fairness means a reward and other times a punishment. We reap the consequences of our actions, whether good or bad.

But this is the world's view. A reward-based system in which we earn what we get.

Jesus, in today's Gospel reading, challenges that world view. Jesus shares a story of grace in which all the workers are rewarded equally for differing amounts of work. I wonder, when you were listening to me reading the parable, if it struck you as unfair?

Jesus once again challenging his listeners, and us, to ignore the world view and to embrace the kingdom view. The kingdom view that challenges the status quo, the outrageous gift of grace that reverses 'business as usual', the upside-down kingdom of God where "the last will be first, and the first will be last."

We live in a reward-based society. The world says that the first are first because they deserve it, it is what is fair, but in the kingdom of heaven, our human understanding of fairness is not a priority – grace is the rule in heaven. Grace that looks beyond our productivity, our appearance, our status, our accomplishments or our failures. Grace sees us as more than what we do, or what we leave undone. Grace gives us value because we are God's beloved children.

The world view of fairness reveals human effort, it makes distinctions and separations. Rewards are based on merit. Whereas grace reveals the goodness of God, grace seeks unity and inclusion. There are no conditions on grace, there is no performance required. We just have to open ourselves up to a relationship with the God of grace, who longs to give us the gifts of grace that God has for all of us. When we accept the gift of grace and understand that God's love cannot be earned – it is there for all of us accept - then the way we see the world, our lives and those around us changes.

The gift of grace reminds us that we are not self-sufficient and independent as the world view would have us believe. Grace reminds us that our worth is not determined by our productivity. Grace rejects discrimination and oppression. It opens our eyes to the dangers of setting up unreasonable expectations for ourselves and others as well as for God.

In Jesus' parable, the workers were tied by a reward mentality. They complained to the landowner that the workers that had only worked an hour had been made equal to the workers that had worked all day. But the workers were all equal, they *all* needed a job, they *all* were chosen, they

all were invited in by the landowner. The only difference between them, is not the time that they started work, but the terms under which they entered the vineyard. The first ones that were hired began work after agreeing the usual daily wage. They got what they bargained for. The workers that came in later did not ask for the usual daily wage, they began work at all those different times trusting that they would be paid 'whatever was right'. The amount of 'whatever was right' was not decided by the workers that were hired first, or by the worldly reward-based view, it was decided by the landowner. The later workers received more than they earned, more than they deserved, more than they had a right to hope for. 'Whatever is right' isn't about fairness, it is about grace. And that is what God does. That is what the kingdom of heaven is all about. An outrageous un-earnt, undeserved, outpouring of love - 'whatever is right' for our lives.

So, the challenge for us today is, are we settling for the world's view or can we trust God to give us 'whatever is right' for our lives, for our needs. In the kingdom of heaven, 'whatever is right' will always be more than fair, more than we could ask, more than we could imagine. It just might not look like our reward-based world view has conditioned us to expect.

For many of us, a reward-based life is easier to understand than a grace-based life, so how can we live a more grace filled life?

One thing, would be to stop comparing ourselves and our lives to others. if we refuse to engage in world-view competition that means for us to win someone else must lose. If we trust in God's promises that there is enough for everyone. If we understand that gifts of grace are freely given not earnt. If we let go of the expectation of receiving what we think we deserve, then we give God the freedom to give us 'whatever is right', trusting that God has our best interests at heart.

If we let go of the world view that encourages comparison, competition and unreasonable expectations, then perhaps we can make space in our lives that can be filled with the grace of God. Then, as Jesus tells us, the world would look a lot more like the kingdom of heaven
Amen