

IT'S NOT FAIR Reflection for Pentecost 16 by Megan Cambridge

How many of us growing up in our families or raising our own have heard the cries of '*it's not fair*'.

Growing up I had an older brother. He was quite a lot older than me and seemed, to my mind, to lead a charmed life being allowed to do all sorts of things that I wasn't allowed to – *it's not fair*. Years later he expressed to me how unfair it was to be the older brother; all that was expected of him as a boy and as someone older who 'should know better' and who should set an example – *it's not fair*. I am reminded of an American strip cartoon Calvin and Hobbes, perhaps you are familiar with it. It features the 6-year-old Calvin and his best friend a tiger called Hobbes. In the strip I am reminded of Calvin is asking his father why he can't stay up late when his parents can. He shouts loudly '*it's not fair!*' and his father replies that the world isn't fair. Calvin's last words are "I know, but why isn't it unfair in my favour?"

My brother and I would accuse each other of being the favourite and most of the time that was a game to wind each other up but it does reflect a very real part of our nature, to want to be the chosen one. That's perhaps why the parable in Matthew's gospel reading hits home. If the landowner, God, is going to be extravagant and generous, why not towards us? We want to be the favourite children of God. As Calvin says 'I know but why isn't it ever unfair in my favour?'

We learn today in our gospel reading that we are all "favourites". The landowner showed generosity to the other workers. I doing so the landowner wasn't taking away from the earlier labourers but was adding to the numbers of those who would be blessed. As I once heard it explained 'It's not like God was giving out one pie and dividing it into smaller and smaller pieces of pie because more people were there. Everyone was getting pie'.

In Matthew's parable of the vineyard workers, those who have worked all day react to the vineyard owner's generosity with righteous indignation. We have heard the story many times and do we feel okay about it? Surely, *It's not fair!* and yet: not so. The truth is, it's only unfair in our simplistic world of concrete morality and justice.

This parable reminds us that there is an ongoing tension between our sense of justice and fairness and our understanding of God's abundant grace. It's a story that we read over and over again in the scriptures. In the Old Testament reading for today Jonah is angry at God for sparing the city of Nineveh. Jonah sits on the brow of the hill outside the city and sulks because God spared it. From Jonah's concrete moral perspective, the people of Nineveh should have been punished after they had done so much wrong. Remember also the parable of the prodigal son; the elder brother who couldn't understand his father special treatment of his prodigal brother on his return and then the Pharisee at prayer who thanks God that he is not like the sinful publican. Divine grace is a great leveller, putting all recipients on an equal footing.

Parables are meant to turn the mirror on the listener, and challenge us to put ourselves in the story. No matter where we are in the queue for payment, this

parable asks us to consider how we might respond to God's grace to His extravagant generosity, whether expected because of a relationship established long ago, or something that comes in the middle of the day or even at the last minute.

If we can get past our grumbling and resistance, we might just discover a better response to grace – gratitude. Gratitude for what God gives to others, and for what God gives to us as well. That is what the parable is pointing us towards.

In God's world, in the Kingdom of Heaven, it's absolutely fair. For everyone, everyone, in this parable is treated generously. They don't necessarily receive what they deserve. They weren't paid for the total number of hours they worked; they were each paid generously, even extravagantly in some cases. That is what God's Kingdom is like: extravagant blessing.

We live in a world that contains both injustice and suffering and abundance and joy. From a human point of view, this distribution seems quite random. Some of us struggle with financial issues, some are faced with relationship difficulties. Some of us may suffer from health concerns or struggle with addiction. Far too many around the world struggle with the simple need to put food on the table: every single day. That's life and *it's not fair*. George Monbiot wrote: ““If wealth was the inevitable result of hard work and enterprise, every woman in Africa would be a millionaire.”

Although life may be unfair, God is not. God is extravagantly generous: to everyone. Today's scripture readings tell us that God does not make distinctions. It seems we all merit God's unreserved love, blessing and forgiveness and we certainly all need it. Yes, our sufferings are of different kinds, degrees, and extremes, but we all suffer. We all sin and all need the generosity of a God who loves us both in spite of and because of everything we do.

In the words of the Psalmist:

'The Lord is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. The Lord is good to all, and his compassion is over all that he has made.'

God's Kingdom is about extravagant love. God's Kingdom is about love without judgment. God's Kingdom is about reward without comparison. It seems that in God's kingdom it is, as Calvin would like it to be, unfair in all our favours.