

Fairness, justice – and scandalous grace.

I wonder what ideas or images come into your mind when you hear the word 'grace'? For some, it will be a person (my granddaughter's middle name is Grace), for others it might be the poised and feather-light movement of a professional ballet dancer. Maybe it's the period that we are given, by statute, to change our minds after we have entered into a financial contract, or a reminder of a pre-meal prayer ("for what we are about to receive....").

Or it may be a word that we hear from time to time in the Bible readings. A word which really can't mean any of those suggestions, but which seems to be actually rather important. So important that, as someone who goes to church, we are just automatically expected to know what it means. (Salvation, redemption and eschatology also fall into this category.) But what if we don't? What if "grace" to us is no more than some words we use at the end of many church meetings ("the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God....")

What are we missing if we don't quite "get" what grace means?

Grace is the word we use to mean God's unconditional love. It is God's unmerited favour, given as a gift to each and every one of us. Unmerited because we do not deserve it. Favour, because that is the attitude with which God looks on us. Unconditional, meaning we cannot earn it. Equally, we cannot lose it. God is love, and when he looks on each one of us, he loves us. That is God's nature. "God loves you – and there is nothing you can do about it."

It is the most ridiculous thing in creation. The very idea that the God of power and majesty who made all things from nothing, can love an individual human being without limit; and then the idea that God can, and does, look on every single human being in that way is hard for our simple human minds to grasp.

But it is true. God loves us not because we have earned his love. But just because we "are."

That's a long preamble to this week's parable – the parable of the workers in the vineyard. It's a parable which I can almost guarantee will make you think "how can that be fair?" But maybe it's not a story about "fairness" ie getting what we deserve, but a story about justice and about God's scandalous grace....

Matthew 20:1-16

[Jesus said...] 'For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire labourers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the labourers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard.

When he went out about nine o'clock, he saw others standing idle in the market-place; and he said to them, "You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right." So they went.

When he went out again about noon and about three o'clock, he did the same.

And about five o'clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, "Why are you standing here idle all day?" They said to him, "Because no one has hired us." He said to them, "You also go into the vineyard."

When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, "Call the labourers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first."

When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage.

Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, saying, "These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat."

But he replied to one of them, "Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?" So, the last will be first, and the first will be last.'

So, no, on one level it's not fair. I have to confess I have always had a lot of sympathy with those who had been working hard all day. And it really challenges my view of God. Surely, if we cannot look to God for fairness, where can we look?

But what if...? What if God is interested not so much in fairness – "getting what one has earned", as in justice – "receiving what one needs".

What if the landowner invited the people to work in his vineyard not because he needed them to do the work, but so that he could provide for the labourers whilst respecting their dignity and autonomy? In Jesus' time, the person who was employed on a daily basis lived a precarious existence. The daily wage was enough for food for one day only. If you didn't get work, then you didn't eat that day – and neither did your family or dependents. That's why there were still people hoping to be hired at 5pm. Even 1/12 of the daily subsistence level was better than nothing.

Paying the daily wage for one hour's work might not have been "fair", but it was just. It acknowledged that everyone has the right to survive and to feed their family.

But what if this story shows us something else as well?

Something about fairness ("getting what we deserve") and justice ("getting what we need"). For in the great way of things – what do we "deserve"? In the great cosmic balance of living fully in God's way and messing things up, which side is heavier? Reality tells us that the messing things up side is heavier every time. It is the human condition.

What if, to bridge the gap, the landowner did the work in the vineyard himself? The hot, sticky, painful work in the blazing heat of the day. Alone. Perhaps this is where the full concept of grace comes into play. For in order to square the circle of “justice” (recognising and responding to each individual’s needs) and fairness (“getting what we deserve”) there is work to be done. Work which Jesus did. Alone. Not in the vineyard, but on the cross.

So, what if this parable shows that God is interested not so much in what we do, as in who we are. What if the story really points us to God’s unconditional love, God’s unmerited favour? To God’s scandalous grace, which says to everyone “you can’t earn my love – it’s my free gift to you.”

God’s free gift. At least, free to us. Not free to God. It cost God everything.