Grace is even better than being fair

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Pentecost + 17 – Matthew 20.1-16: The Labourers in the Vineyard

When I taught English to refugees, I had to get them to speak with each other in English. One of the best discussion starters I ever had for provoking discussion in my classes was today’s parable of the labourers in the vineyard. It never failed. A frigidly passive class would read this story and suddenly erupt into a storm of conflicting points of view all eager to be heard.

The Eastern Europeans always opposed the landowner. Paying the latecomers first was an affront to the dignity of the first-hired workers with whom they unquestioningly identified themselves. South Americans were deeply suspicious of the motives of the landowner. They thought he wanted to use his wealth to preen his ego, humiliating the ‘all-day-suckers’ by making them a laughing stock at pay time. Others were disgusted at the owner’s insensitivity, or else deeply worried by the disorderliness of it all.

When the hubbub eventually died down, the eldest Vietnamese man in the class would stand to speak for his people on this weighty matter. And each time, it was the same message: *We think the landowner is a good man. He understands that everyone needs the same amount of money to give their families food and clothes, and he gives it to them. He is a good man.* On one occasion the Vietnamese elder added that the latecomers to the vineyard had been waiting all day for work, and so it was a cause for deep joy that their good faith was rewarded.

As far as the other students could see, the Vietnamese

students might as well have been from a different planet. But they were displaced persons too!? So whether it was the severity of the Vietnamese experience of escape, something to do with their particular stream of Mahayana Buddhism, or simply being the most recent wave of refugees, whatever gave them their perspective remains a mystery to me. But they always understood the need of the labourers who'd waited all day for work and were last to be hired, and always rejoiced with them in being paid a day's wage. For them, the Kingdom of God is not fair or just. It's better than that. It's generous.

I met this parable in the flesh while living in Jerusalem. Around quarter past five each morning, the call to prayer would sound from the minaret just down the street and wake me up. Morning Prayer in the cathedral was an hour later, so I had a quiet time to contemplate the sounds of the new day. One sound always came just after prayers at the mosque finished. It was the sound of hundreds of feet; young men walking wordlessly from the mosque down towards the old city. They were walking down to an open market place on Sultan Suleiman Road, opposite the Old City's Damascus Gate. They waited there from very early each morning hoping to be hired as day labourers by Israeli farm and factory owners.

I passed this market place often. I saw the way the young men were hired. An Israeli truck or a car would pull over to the kerb, and one of the occupants would bellow out the number of labourers they needed. Several of the young labourers would run over and jump aboard, and off they'd go.

But where people live under military occupation, gatherings of young men are not favourably viewed. Several times each day, a truckload of young soldiers would drive onto the market place and give the would-be labourers a hard time. They'd demand to see their identity papers, search them, shoving and kicking them around. It was all part of a daily ritual of humiliation and oppression. But still the young men came every day. They had no other way of providing for their families.

I read this parable and my Vietnamese students have taught me what those young workers would feel for a land-owner who came back every few hours to rescue more of them from their plight; what their families would think of him paying them enough for their daily bread, regardless of the hours worked. Jesus said *the kingdom of heaven is like this landowner*…the Kingdom which operates on the principles *this* land-owner lives by is a Kingdom which humanity desperately needs; a Kingdom where a person is valued; valued regardless of work done or ethnicity. In God's Kingdom, generous grace abounds simply because it's needed. And Jesus' parable tells us this Kingdom grace can be embodied in an individual; in you or me.

Today's parable is like a miniature of salvation history featuring us—the Church—as the late comers! We, Gentile Christians never endured the early start that the slaves in Egypt did. We weren't called through the Red Sea at 6.00 am on the first morning of our pilgrimage. We weren't called at 9.00 am to Mount Sinai either; nor roasted at noon by the prophets' fiery summons to faithfulness. We weren't even in the 3.00 pm cohort caught up in the tragedy of the exile. We're the five o'clockers; the eleventh-hour people, who, a bare hour before knock-off time, had nothing to take home to our families. Then suddenly, we were called from certain humiliation and offered all the blessings of Kingdom life.

If we're ever tempted to imagine that it's our present power or wealth that gives our lives meaning, we are warned by this parable that our life's true meaning comes from grace alone; from that unexpected call that we or our ancestors responded to.

The labourers in the Jerusalem marketplace also tell me to watch out for cultural blind spots. Most ordinary Israeli citizens are as oblivious to plight of Palestinians as we are to the injustice Aboriginal Australians continue to endure. Jesus tells us to be aware – like the landowner obviously was – and to be gracious and generous.

Be aware, be generous. Be better than simply just or fair. Go for grace. God wants all his little ones to experience grace. God calls us to be a mighty river of peace and justice in order that his little ones might drink deeply from the cup of grace. Amen