

Trinity 16 2026

I stand here in need of God's mercy and grace, may I speak in the name of God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

That's not fair! Any parent, carer, any person ever looking after or working with children of primary school age is likely to have heard that occasionally. Or we might remember ourselves having protested in such a way as we received a piece of cake slightly smaller than that of our sibling. We develop a sense of what is fair and what is not as children, and fairness continues to be a value we want to hold on to as adults. We should share fairly. The rules should be fair. But what does it mean to be fair in a complex world, that is often not quite as simple as dividing a piece of cake between children?

The parable of the landowner and the day labourers is a good illustration of unfairness. It is not surprising that the labourers who worked all day long in the vineyard protest the unfairness of receiving the same wages as the ones who only joined for an hour:

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.

The landowner is unfair. And he is unapologetic despite his blatant unfairness:

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?

Basically, mind your own business, it's my money and I can do with it as I please, take it or leave it. Clearly this landowner does not care one bit about fairness. He simply does as he pleases. How is this unfairness in anyway something Jesus would want to defend? If that's what God's

Kingdom is to look like, how is that good news for us?

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

Each of the day labourers, no matter when they started working, is paid the usual daily wage. Then as now, the salary of a day labourer was low. It was just enough to buy food and necessities for one day. Had the landowner decided to only give an adequate proportion of that salary to the latecomers, they and their families would likely not be able to eat that day. The landowner chooses to give everyone enough for their daily needs. That's not fair, but it is generous. The landowner acts not based on what each deserves, but on what each one needs. A sufficient income to cover the needs of the day.

There is a point to be made that day labour, still in practice today, is unjust, as it provides labourers with insufficient income and security in case of injury or illness. In England today, zero-hours contracts for example are modern version of day labour and there are still many parts of the world, where labourers gather in specific places, in the hope someone will come to offer them work for the day. In many cases these practices have links to modern day slavery. So there is a host of reasons why the abolishing of day labour practices would be an even better solution than simply giving each labourer a day's wage, even if they have worked only for an hour. From a big picture perspective, the landowner is part of an injustice system, and giving a full daily wage to all is at best a band aid on a gaping wound.

But then let's also not forget that this a parable Jesus tells, about the God's Kingdom, illustrated with a situation that would have been very familiar to his listeners, many of which likely were day labourers or had family members and friends who were day labourers, living with the constant worry about if there was going to be enough money to buy

food that day. What if you are ill one morning, but trying to get up and look for work anyway, arriving late in the market place? What if getting to the market place means several hours walking and exhausted from yesterday's back breaking labour you overslept, arriving late at the market place? What if your child is running a fever and needs medicine you have no money for, so you borrow from friends and neighbours until you have enough, but arrive way too late in the market place, pushing you deeper into the vicious cycle of debt? The people listening to Jesus would have been familiar with these situations. They would have, like us, been annoyed at the unfairness of all receiving the same wages. But they would also have understood the importance of each labourer receiving enough for their daily needs.

And that is the point of this parable. It is not an advertisement for the injustice of day labour practices, but an illustration of God's Kingdom. God, the landowner in the parable, will ensure all have enough of what they need. All will receive enough of what they need, but no one will become rich because they have worked more. That is unfair. If we are followers of Christ, doing what we can to act and speak in ways that please God and that are making a positive impact in the world, simply in the hopes of a bigger reward at the end of it all, we will be disappointed. Jesus' parable basically tells us, that as long as we show up in God's vineyard, we will receive the same reward as anyone who works all day long. All will have enough of what they need in God's Kingdom, and it will have nothing to do with who deserves what. God's Kingdom will be unfair, but generous. That might be hard to swallow. It might pose some challenging questions to us. If we won't receive more than others from God, do we still choose to work for God's Kingdom? And if so, why? If God is unfair but generous, what might that mean for how we treat those we believe to be undeserving? What does it look like to live for an unfair but generous God? Amen.