

Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me?
Or are you envious because I am generous (good)? Mt 20.15

In this parable all the labourers receive the same wage at the end of the day even though some of them have worked for only one hour and some for twelve.

The ones who had been there all day are astounded: 'You have made them equal to us, who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.' They have our sympathy. Doesn't it seem entirely reasonable that those who've made a greater effort should receive greater rewards? After all, we're not surprised when people speak up if they're being treated unfairly. I was interested to read in Diana Rigg's obituary last week that she battled the gender pay gap when she was in the Avengers; and women are still demanding equal pay for equal work. This story, however, seems to offer a vision of equal pay for *unequal* work!

But the order to give all the labourers the same pay is not simply a generous whim. All the workers, the first and last, receive the usual daily rate, one *denarius*, which was then a bare subsistence wage, just enough to sustain a family. The landowner knows that the pay for an hour's work will not keep a poor family – children will go hungry. The parable describes the behaviour of a big-hearted employer who is compassionate and full of sympathy for the poor. This, Jesus is saying, is what God is like, this is the measure of his goodness.

Matthew's emphasis is on the kingdom, a kingdom which would include not only the poor as well as the rich, but the despised, the outcast, sinners. Even tax collectors and sinners will be granted a place in God's kingdom, just as even the latecomers are granted a full day's pay.

The parable is also addressed to the early Christians who resented the influx of the Gentiles into the (originally Jewish) community who had borne the burden and the heat of the day. 'You have made them equal to us' was exactly the point as far as Matthew was concerned.

Those who grumbled against the landowner represent those who criticised and opposed the good news of the gospel in Jesus' day. How does the parable speak to us today? Well, the pandemic has served to highlight the disproportionate

suffering of poorer communities. Some embrace the idea of a fair and just society, while others fear changing the *status quo* which has benefitted them.

So, far from telling us to put up with the unfairness of life and the whims of our employers, this parable is a clear presentation of the good news of the kingdom and of the character of God. The labourers who were engaged last do not deserve a full day's wages; that they receive it is entirely due to the power and the goodness, the compassion and magnanimity of their employer. It shows the difference between the world of merit and the world of grace; the law contrasted with the gospel. In this parable Jesus says, 'This is what God is like; and because he is like that, so am I.' We can pray with confidence: 'Thy kingdom come.' **Amen.**