

"I want to give to the man who was hired last the same as I gave you. Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?" (v15)

"Fair go!"

That's a typical Aussie saying. We value a "fair go". Everyone should have the same opportunity, be treated equally, and fairly. We get cranky when someone is harshly treated and not given a "fair go". In theory we value a fair go, but in practice we are not always happy if people are treated equally, especially if we think we deserve better. And we find it harder to accept when others receive more than a "fair go" in our minds.

Can you imagine working for an employer who paid everyone the same wage? Sounds fair but imagine the junior employee or the cleaner getting the same pay as the most senior manager, the person who has been there 2 days the same as the person who has worked there for 40 years, the chief executive at whose desk the buck stops got the same as the receptionist at a branch office in the country. Doesn't sound fair? I suppose it depends which worker you were! I work for an employer like that. Every pastor gets the same wage, from the General President down to the young pastor in his first country parish, seminary lecturers and chaplains, we all get the same pay. Now the graduate pastor would be happy about that, after all he has gone without income for 5 years and comes out with a car loan and a HEP debt and some have young mouths to feed. The President on the other hand could be unhappy because the buck stops at his desk. He is responsible for so much and gets all the complaints! He is away from home more and has more stress. He may have to sort out the messes the new pastor gets into and he gets the same pay for it! He could be cranky about that and think "why bother". But he doesn't. He is thankful the church shares generously with him and the new young pastor. Our system of pay may seem unfair in worldly terms, but it works because our values are different to the world's values. We even call the way we calculate it as "generous sharing".

In Mathew 20:1-16 Jesus tells a story about "generous sharing" by an employer to teach about God.

A man had a vineyard. The grapes were ready for harvest and he needed workers. Early one morning he jumps in the ute and heads down to the local Centrelink office and signs up a group of men standing in the line looking for a job. He promises them award wages for a days work and off they go. Everyone is happy. He soon realizes he needs more workers, so he goes back into town at 9am, noon, 3pm and finally at 5pm. The last workers hired were probably already over at the pub thinking there was no hope of work that day, maybe some of them were not hired because they were not the best workers anyway. But the man wants workers and he is willing to give them a fair go. When knock off time comes the boss gathers the workers and hands the pays out, beginning with the last. They open the pay packets and discover a full days pay in it. They think it is Christmas and can't believe it! Seeing this, those who had worked all day imagine they are going to get a bonus, but they are given the same pay, the pay for a full days work which they had agreed to.

Like most of us would, they took their money and started grumbling. **"These men who were hired last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day."**

But he answered one of them, "Friend, I am not being unfair to you. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius? Take your pay and go. I want to give the man who was hired last the same as I gave you. Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?"

“Are you envious because I am generous?”

That's the real issue here.

It isn't that the boss doesn't give a fair go but that he gives more than a fair go!

And that's just what God does. He treats people better than they deserve.

And sometimes we find it hard to take.

God comes looking for people.

He will take as many as want to come and work for him.

He will accept the strongest and fittest and the weakest and those nobody wants.

He gives each of us the same forgiveness and eternal life. He rewards us not because of what we have done but what Jesus did for all of us with the work of his life and death for us.

Now that comes as good news to those who come late into the kingdom of God. They know they are only there by God's grace. It is sometimes harder for those of us who have been in the kingdom a lot longer, been faithful about church attendance and keeping the church going and living a moral life. We don't begrudge others coming in but it is hard for us not to imagine we deserve something more than the last in and the "least" deserving in our minds for all our long service.

In the Old Testament reading today Jonah thought the wicked city of Nineveh was going to get what it deserved – he hoped God would flatten it! Jonah was given the job of calling the people back to God. He initially went the other direction, but eventually did the job. The people repented and so did God, he changed his mind about judgement and showed mercy to them. Jonah thought it wasn't fair and he got angry with God for being so generous. God had to remind him that he too had disobeyed, and he too had been treated with mercy, undeserved mercy. God had given him more than a fair go too, so why shouldn't he give the Ninevites another chance?

Martin Luther the great church reformer said at the end of his life “we are beggars, that's the truth.” He didn't see himself as any more deserving than anyone else to be in the Kingdom of God and was happy to scrape in by God's grace to him in Jesus.

I visited a very sick person in hospital on Friday, not from St Pauls. His wife said to me she wasn't angry with God but it seemed so unfair that her husband who had given a lot of his life to the church was suffering like this. I agreed with her.

“Fair go God!” I thought too.

Life certainly doesn't seem fair at times, and it isn't. People don't always get what they deserve and others get what they don't deserve. Life is not fair. Neither is the kingdom of God fair, but the kingdom of God is not less than fair, it is more than fair. It gives us all more than a fair go, that's the point of the story. It is grace, all grace. All are invited to be and serve in the kingdom. All are forgiven equally, all receive heaven as gift when they stop thinking about what they deserve and thank God for Christ.

If we were to demand a fair go from God what is really fair?

Is it fair that we get forgiven of everything we have thought said and done?

The reality is that none of us gets what we deserve. And when we think about Jesus and the gift of eternal life we realise we all get better than we could ever earn.

In God's Kingdom, his vineyard, hard work doesn't necessarily attract the biggest reward, the first can be last and the last first, the rich and poor, strong and weak are all given a fair go, in fact more than a fair go. In God's kingdom there is room for undeserved generosity and grace. In fact there is even a place for hard work with no thought of reward at all! We can simply be thankful for the privilege of being in the vineyard at all and the call to serve a gracious boss.

If we stop and think about it, God certainly is both fair and generous.

May that be the flavour of life here in this corner of his vineyard too.