

**God, that's not fair!**  
**Pentecost 16**  
**24 September 2017**  
**Revd Jenny Wilkens**  
*Exodus 16:2-15*  
*Matthew 20:1-16*



[http://www.stlukesinthecity.org.nz/sermons\\_pid\\_22.html](http://www.stlukesinthecity.org.nz/sermons_pid_22.html)

Being the youngest of 4 children, one of my earliest memories is being a keen observer of my mother cutting up into 6 the pint block of ice-cream we would have as a special treat on Sunday! I am pretty sure that 'it's not fair' would have been one of the more frequently used phrases in my vocabulary, particularly when I as the youngest felt hard done by! I also recall that one of my parents' mantras was 'in this family we share', presumably because we weren't always that good at it!

The cry 'it's not fair' comes through to us loud and clear from the Scriptures, whether it's the people of Israel grumbling in the wilderness because the exhilaration of their escape from slavery has turned into nostalgia for the fleshpots of Egypt; or whether it's the ancient tale of Job protesting to God the suffering of the innocent; or Jonah complaining when God decides not to punish the people of Nineveh but to have mercy on them instead; or whether as in today's Gospel, the workers in the vineyard who've borne the heat of the day feel hard done by when the payrate for the day turns out to be a flat rate for all.

I for one am glad that we have these stories showing how God's people over the ages have wrestled with the big questions of justice and mercy: what is fair? What is just? It allows us to come to God with our questions, frustration and anger when things happen in our world where we want to say for ourselves or on behalf of others: God, it's just not fair!

We have prided ourselves in New Zealand over the years in being a fair society; our welfare state was founded on the basis of giving everyone in this country 'a fair go' – indeed that's become Kiwi jargon, and the TV programme 'Fair Go' always had a keen following of those wanting to see people being given a fair go, the opportunity for justice to be done.

But what is fair and just? This has been wrestled with by philosophers and ethicists through the ages. We can go right back BC to the Greek Aristotle who said that we should treat equals equally and we should treat unequals *unequally*, in proportion to that inequality.

For Aristotle, where inequality exists, it needs to be addressed by taking from the advantaged and giving to the disadvantaged.

Aristotle could well have something to say to us here living in a country which now has one of the highest levels of inequality in the OECD.

Max Rashbrooke, editor of 'Inequality: A New Zealand Crisis' says<sup>1</sup> a growing income gap causes people to lose their sense of what life is like for people in the other half. They trust each other less, and they care about each other less and so they're less likely to extend a helping hand and feel like they've got something in common with everyone else.

Probably most Kiwis, regardless of their religious beliefs, would hold to the Golden Rule, Jesus' summary of the Torah: 'do unto others as you would have them do to you' (Mt 7:12). But when it comes to who should receive justice and mercy, it seems we often think that *other people* should always receive *justice*, their just desserts, while *we* personally would like not just to receive justice, but also *mercy* as well— I didn't mean to, it's not my fault, there were mitigating circumstances.

It all depends where you're coming from. It's been suggested<sup>2</sup> we evaluate any policy for fairness by asking this question: "Would *the most advantaged* person in [NZ] society accept this policy as fair, if at an instant, that person became *the most disadvantaged* and had to rely on the policy for their own survival?" Let's apply it to housing, for example: Would a social outcome of adequate housing for all New Zealanders be considered fair by *the most advantaged* person in society if, at an instant, that person became *the most disadvantaged* and required social housing for themselves?

That is when reality bites, when you don't just think in the abstract about another person's situation, but wear their shoes. Role reversal.

I think this is what Jesus is trying to teach his disciples in the parable of the workers in the vineyard. In the chapter before, we hear the story of the rich young man who cannot accept the call to give up all he owns to follow Christ. Then Peter asks Jesus, what about us? We've given up everything for you, what is in it for us? Jesus goes on then to tell this parable – and we get it! We empathise with the workers who've sweated hard and worked right through the heat of the day, when they find out those who've only worked for an hour are getting the same day's wage as them.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.stuff.co.nz/national/politics/68600911/income-inequality-how-nz-is-one-of-the-worst-in-the-world> 18 May 2015

<sup>2</sup> Greg Coyle, 'Just vote fairly', Tui Motu, magazine. Issue 218, August 2017: 18-19.

God, that's not fair, we say. Surely those workers who've worked the whole day should get what they deserve, twice or three times or eight times as much as those who only work for one hour, that's the way the world works, on productivity and efficiency, you get out what you put in. But in Jesus' proclamation of the topsy-turvy kingdom of heaven, *justice* is filtered through the lens of *mercy*<sup>3</sup>. The vineyard owner keeps going back to the marketplace all day for more workers, he must have seen that there were still day labourers there without work, he knew that they had families to feed, he had mercy on them and took them on, even though he knew he would not get a full day's work out of them. He had more concern for the *workers* themselves than for the *work* he would get from them. He had concern for their dignity and their value, that he could give them a way of participating in society and caring for their families. And at the end of the day, they all received a day's wages – what we might call nowadays a living wage, sufficient to live on and to sustain a family.

Last week I was able to attend part of a day seminar with Sara Miles, part of the staff team at St Gregory of Nyssa Episcopal Church in San Francisco and founder of the Food Pantry there. Sara talked of a principle which informs the way they do liturgy together, which to my mind is also an example of the topsy-turvy 'role reversal' ways of the kingdom of God. They call it 'glorifying the stranger', not just welcoming the stranger but glorifying them. It sounds strange, doesn't it? St. Gregory's begins its Sunday liturgy with this prayer, "Blessed be God the Word, who came to his own and his own received him not; for in this way God glorifies the stranger. O God, show us your image in all who come to us today that we may welcome them and you."

They look for the stranger to bring that portion of God's Spirit with them that we don't yet have, and that we need, to see more of who God can be for us. Now that's a very different perspective from welcoming the stranger on our terms as someone who will only *receive* hospitality from us.

Of course Sara told all sorts of stories of the challenges of that and the unexpected things that happened, but also of the joy of unexpected gifts and miracles brought by glorifying the stranger in our midst. It's been put this way: We fill up what is lacking in them, and they fill up what is lacking in us<sup>4</sup>. Perhaps there is something to ponder there...let us pause and give thanks to God who makes strangers into friends, and who keeps seeking us out, treating all of us not just with justice but with mercy, honouring our dignity as loved children of God and valued workers in God's vineyard. Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> Jane Williams, *Lectionary Reflections Year A*, SPCK, 2004, p.111.

<sup>4</sup> Megan McKenna, *Parables – the Arrows of God*, Orbis Books, New York, 1994, p.73.