

## TRINITY 13 (YEAR A) – 18.09.11 – ST PAUL’S, CHICHESTER

### *Philippians 1:21-end; Matthew 20:1-16*

For my holiday this summer I had a week up in Northumberland staying in a friend’s holiday home there. Earlier this year I bought a cheap laptop computer from Tesco and a bottom-of-the-range pay-as-you-go mobile phone. My youngest son, who hasn’t started work yet and is about to go to university, has just spent three months living and working in New York City and three months travelling round Central America with his friends – and he has just acquired a brand new Apple Mac Pro laptop that cost twice as much as mine, and a top-of-the-range all singing and dancing iPhone that cost four times the price of my mobile phone.

Have you ever noticed how sometimes life just doesn’t seem fair? It’s one of the hard realities we learn early on. Sometimes life just isn’t fair. If you’ve had a younger brother or sister, perhaps you can remember feeling a bit disgruntled when they seemed to get special attention or privileges. I think it’s the way older employees sometimes feel when young hot shots come into the workplace and start telling them how to do the job they’ve been doing OK for years. It’s perhaps the way that relatively lower paid veteran footballers feel when today’s stars are taken on with multi-million pound contracts. Some parents are not fair in the way they treat their children, just as employers can be with their employees and teachers with their students.

Sometimes that’s just the way life is – which is partly the point of the parable of the workers in the vineyard. It’s unlikely that many of us have been migrant workers – but it doesn’t take much imagination to guess how angry you might have been in that story. Suppose you had signed on to pick fruit for eight hours at the rate of £5 an hour, or £40 for the day – a fair day’s wage for a fair day’s toil. You work right through the heat of the day without even a break for lunch. When it comes to pay-time, you stand in a queue behind someone who showed up for work at 4pm and had only worked for an hour. You watch closely and see that the man is paid £40 for his hour’s work and that sets your heart beating in anticipation. Naturally, you figure since you worked eight hours, you’re going to get eight times as much. But when you get to the front of the queue and are given your pay envelope, you find only £40. How would you feel? I don’t know about you, but I’d be pretty upset.

But sometimes that’s the way things happen, isn’t it? Sometimes life just isn’t fair. So we try to deal with the unfairness – like the lorry driver, just a small chap, who had parked his articulated lorry outside the roadside café and had gone in for lunch. While he was sitting there, three burly motorcyclists came in and began picking on him, grabbed his food away from him and laughed in his face. The lorry driver said nothing, got up, paid for his food and walked out. One of the cyclists laughed to the waitress, “Boy, he wasn’t much of a man, was he?” The waitress replied, “No, I guess not. He’s not much of a lorry driver, either,” she said pointing out of the window. “He just ran over three motorbikes.”

But even if we are reasonably good at dealing with things in life that seem unfair, there are still challenges that come our way. They usually come when bad things happen to good people – when a young person gets a serious illness, or when an honest and upright person loses their job. Sometimes life is so unfair that not even positive thinking can overcome it. There are some situations where telling someone to think more positively would be a useless thing to say – precisely because their experience is totally unfair.

And that's when we begin to question not just the fairness of life, but the fairness of God – which is what the workers in the vineyard, and the hearers of the story, no doubt did. In fact, there are plenty of Bible characters who would be happy to join this parade – Job and Habakkuk (both feeling cursed in their lives and feeling abandoned by God), Joseph (dumped in the pit and sold into slavery), Mary (demanding to know what kind of mess God had got her into) – there are lots of them who could testify about the unfairness of God. Add to this list the litany of deathbed confessions of serial killers or Nazi war criminals or slave traders in former times. What kind of God is it who would listen and forgive? It's just not fair! Isn't this what we might call cheap grace? We have to admit that there are times in our lives when we wonder about the fairness of God.

But – and here is the crucial point of today's passage as I see it – saying that life isn't fair is not the same as saying that *God* isn't fair – and this is for two specific reasons.

The first reason is that God doesn't owe us anything. On the contrary, we owe God everything – our time, our talent, our money, even our very lives. The lives we live are lives that God has given to us – each breath that we take in, the clothes we wear, the food on our table, our health in its varying degrees, the gifts of mind and body to do the jobs we have been called to do – all of that is the sheer gift of God. In addition to all this is the amazing grace given to us through Jesus Christ that is beyond all imagination. As each of stands at the check-out counter before God, for our sin and the trouble we have caused we owe a billion pounds each in debt to God – but God rips up the invoice, not only for those of us who have been faithfully working for Him all these years, but also for those who have never done anything for God and who walk in right off the street just at the last minute. Our bill with God is so big that we could never say, “Hey God, you owe me. I deserve more of your grace, more of your love than him or her.” The fact is, we don't deserve any of it, because God doesn't owe us a thing. And when God doesn't owe us anything, we shouldn't begrudge God's acceptance of those who seem less deserving of God's love than those of us who have been soldiering on in the Church all these years.

The second reason for separating the unfairness of life from the unfairness of God is that God's justice doesn't work the same way as the world's justice works. Now this doesn't mean that God's justice contradicts the world's way of doing things. The justice of the world is good. We need it to order society. Both Karl Rahner (a Roman Catholic) and David H. C. Read (a Presbyterian), believe that justice and love are within the concern of God. Both theologians highlight the importance of contracts in our world, of being fair, and of being paid what was agreed upon. When the labourers in the vineyard cried out, the master answered their outcry with a straight-forward appeal to legality and justice. “Look, you got paid what we agreed on, didn't you?” No matter how unfair the world sometimes seems, God is fair in the way that the world at its best can be – which means “each according to his due.”

Here, the justice of the world and the justice of God correspond. God's love does not replace the justice of the world – rather, it extends it. Love transforms justice and takes it a little bit further – and the result is that it makes us less jealous of latecomers and upstarts in the faith. It makes us less jealous of third world countries where the Church is thriving and which could teach us in the West a thing or two. It makes us less jealous of illegal asylum seekers or unwanted immigrants; and of younger brothers and sisters who get special treatment. The point of this parable, believes theologian Helmut Thielicke, is that no one will ever be able to see the goodness or the fairness of God with a jealous eye. Worldly justice is not wrong. It just doesn't go far enough. God's benevolent justice does not contradict good contract justice,

but it goes beyond it and transforms it and in so doing becomes a model for us to be more just and more loving in our relationships with others.

There is an old Rabbinic parable about a farmer that had two sons. As soon as they were old enough to walk, he took them to the fields and he taught them everything that he knew about growing crops and raising animals. When he got too old to work, the two boys took over the chores of the farm and when the father died, they had found their working together so meaningful that they decided to keep their partnership. So each brother contributed what he could and during every harvest season, they would divide equally what they had corporately produced. Down the years the older brother never married and became an elderly bachelor. The younger brother did marry and had eight wonderful children. Some years later when they were having a lucrative harvest, the old bachelor brother thought to himself one night, “My brother has ten mouths to feed. I only have one. He really needs more of his harvest than I do, but I know he is much too fair to renegotiate. I know what I’ll do. In the dead of the night when he is already asleep, I’ll take some of what I have put in my barn and slip it over into his barn to help him feed his children.”

At the very time he was thinking down that line, the younger brother was thinking to himself, God has given me these wonderful children. My brother hasn’t been so fortunate. He really needs more of this harvest for his old age than I do, but I know him. He’s much too fair. He’ll never renegotiate. I know what I’ll do. In the dead of the night when he’s asleep, I’ll take some of what I’ve put in my barn and slip it over into his barn.” And so one night when the moon was full, those two brothers came face to face, each on a mission of generosity. That night there wasn’t a cloud in the sky, and yet a gentle rain began to fall. And do you know what that was? It was God weeping for joy because two of his children had got the point. Two of his children had come to realize that generosity is the deepest characteristic of the holy – and because we are made in God’s image, our being generous is the secret to our joy as well.

Life is not fair – thank God! It’s not fair because it’s rooted in grace. God’s grace is God’s grace. It is the same for everybody, regardless of who they are, what they have done in life, and how committed they may have been to the Church.

This may sometimes seem unfair to us, but that’s because God’s sense of fairness is different from ours – for in Jesus Christ, God took all the unfairness of our lives and our troubled world on himself and suffered the unfairness of death on a cross that we might have life. In church or hospital or home, in Scripture, sermon and song, in Word and font and altar, we meet this God, who is not only fair but immeasurably kind and generous.

Remember that except for God’s grace in Christ, no one deserves God’s love and forgiveness. And remember that the kingdom of heaven is a gift. In a way we are all latecomers, aren’t we? And yet, in Christ, it’s never too late to come home to God. Amen.

*(The Reverend Canon Dr Philip Bourne)*