

Grumbling and Grace

Exodus 16:2-15; Philippians 1:21-30; Matthew 20:1-16

Ordinary Sunday 25A (20 September) 2026

Waiapu Cathedral

So whose side are you on this morning – the all-day labourers or the lucky last? Who gets our sympathy? Are you with the labourers who worked all day and were paid what they agreed on? Or the ones who were hired late in the day and received what they couldn't possibly earn? It reminds me of other stories that make us take sides, like the one of the two brothers and the loving father, sometimes called "the prodigal son story" – which contrasts the oldest son who worked hard and didn't squander his inheritance with the wretched younger son who was rescued from the pig-sty and the mess of his own foolishness?

Jesus' stories are meant to provoke a reaction in us. They're supposed to make us think, sometimes by shocking us – and this is a provocative story, told not to the crowds but to the disciples. Those who'd worked all day assumed they'd be paid more. They complained. Well actually, they probably muttered amongst themselves first before they went and confronted the landowner. But the landowner – who's astonishingly generous – said, "You agreed to the wage before it was paid" and "it's my money and if I want to pay everyone the same thing, I can." The boss is generous – but the workers are vulnerable. The late-hired workers weren't lazy – they may simply have been the ones no one else wanted. But still something inside us wants to say "it's not fair." This Gospel lesson is hard for those of us who are concerned about fairness. It challenges us. It seems to tell us that God is not fair.

Because imagine if that's how things worked today. The principle of "equal pay for equal work" doesn't always operate as it should, but think about how we'd react if people could sleep late and arrive at work in the late afternoon, knowing they'd get paid for the whole day, just like those who showed up at 9am. The parable shows what it means for the first to be last and the last first – and that can feel threatening to those who identify as "first," as "insiders" – even to insiders who should know a bit about how divine grace operates. Maybe even to us.

Because sometimes, it's the insiders who grumble – not against grace as such, but against grace shown to others they regard as less deserving. We can wonder sometimes whether grace undermines the whole idea of being good, maintaining standards, sticking to the rules. We're uncertain how to cope with a God who, like the landowner, pays not on the basis of merit but of compassion. It's a challenge.

And so is the reading from Exodus. The Israelites were complaining. Actually, they do quite a lot of complaining during their journey to the Promised Land. God has just freed them from slavery in the land of Egypt, and saved them from the Egyptian army chasing after them, and what are they doing? They're grumbling! Muttering amongst themselves, then complaining to Moses and Aaron – except their complaints are really directed at God: "we've got no food – why did you bring us out of Egypt? You should have left us there." The way they're talking, you'd think Egypt was a holiday resort instead of a place of slavery and oppression. But they're hungry, and they're thinking about food, and grumbling wins out over logic.

So how does God respond? Does God blast them with a bolt of lightning, rain down fire from heaven? No – what God rains from heaven is bread, coming down for them fresh each morning, and meat in the evenings. God has heard their grumbling and will provide food, even though their complaints were against God. Is this fair? Do the Israelites get what they deserve?

No, it's not fair – just like the landowner who paid everyone the same for very different hours' work wasn't fair. And maybe the message is sinking home – because these stories aren't exactly subtle. God isn't fair, in the sense that God doesn't operate according to our calculations of fairness and reward. God doesn't give us what we deserve, and maybe that's just as well. Because if we got what we really deserved, we'd be a lot worse off. We aren't merely observers of grace, we're its beneficiaries. All of us are human, fallible individuals. There are times when we have failed to support one another, and to be what we claim to be. There are times when we have failed to serve God, and where our thoughts and actions have been contrary to God's. We said these words earlier in the service. And yes, there are times when we have moaned and complained against God. And if God gave us what we deserve we wouldn't be sitting here so comfortably. So it's just as well that God isn't fair.

But still it can bother us, when we see someone we deem "less worthy" being blessed or honoured, getting a better deal than they should be. After all, almost no one raises the issue of fairness when they are the ones who are favoured or privileged. And most of us can find things to complain about, whether it's how much better it was in the old days, in church or in society at large, or when we think another group is getting a bit extra. It's often what lies behind electioneering slogans.

We want things to be fair. We want God to be fair. But God isn't fair. That's what the story of the bread in the wilderness and the parable Jesus told make quite clear. God isn't fair. Instead – God is extravagant. God chooses to give gifts to those who complain – new blessings fresh every day. God is the generous landowner who chose to pay the workers not on the basis of their merits or what they were entitled to, but on the basis of compassion. Of grace.

And God's grace isn't something we earn. We're not entitled to it – even when we're really trying to live a good life. That's part of the specialness of it – that it's always undeserved, unearned. There's nothing we can do to earn the special favour God offers us, here or in heaven. We are never entitled to grace – it comes from the extravagant love of God.

So how then do we live? That's something Paul kept returning to, over and over. Here he's asking them to live their lives in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ – not because of what they can get out of it, but because of who Christ is for them. As always, Paul bases his "this is how you should live" on the fact of what God has already done for us. God has done so much for us, God loves us so much, that this is how we're invited to live in response: lives full of grace.

The readings this morning are all about grace. The amazing, extravagant grace of God, that doesn't give us what we deserve. That goes further than it has to. In the parable, Jesus invites us to move beyond fairness and into extravagant love. He calls us to stop worrying about whether we've got what we believe we're entitled to and whether someone else is getting a bit more. He bids us remember God's grace, God's generosity and compassion, and invites us to show something of this grace, and generosity and compassion in our dealings with other people. And when we do this, there's no room for complaining. Instead we can rejoice, and look for the blessings God wants to give us, coming to us fresh each morning.

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