

Sermon by The Right Revd Dr Jane Mainwaring, Bishop of Hertford, on Sunday 26 September 2026

Readings: Philippians 1. 21-30 & Matthew 20. 1-16

Growing up, my parents endeavoured to be scrupulously fair between me and my brother, and they have continued to be so even as adults and with the next generation of the family. However, despite their best efforts, the cry of "It's not fair" quite often left my lips as a child, particularly being the youngest. It never felt fair that my brother got to do things before I did - even though as an adult and a mum myself, it makes complete sense! However carefully a piece of cake was cut in two, there was always the cry of "He's got the bigger bit" - to which my parents' solution was to get one of us to do the cutting and the other to choose the piece they wanted!

The cry of "It's not fair" is at the heart of our gospel reading today and at the heart of the story Jesus told.

In any normal work setting, you would expect to get recompense for the work you do. If you work part-time, you get paid for the part-time work. If you work full-time, you get the full salary assigned for the job. That's fair - that's logical - it makes sense and stands up to challenge. But Jesus said to his listeners - this is not how the kingdom of heaven works - this is not how God works.

For it is like a landowner who sends people out to work in his vineyards at different points in the day but then gives each of them the same pay at the end of the day.

Now, I have some sympathy for those who'd worked all day and ended up being paid the same as those who'd done just one hour's work. I get why they felt aggrieved - I think I would in their shoes - because by human ways of thinking, it's just not fair. But Jesus' point in telling this story is that God works differently - he is a generous God.

One of the most well-known verses is the Bible, which I'm sure many here are familiar with, is John 3. 16: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."

"For God **so** loved - that **everyone** may have eternal life."

There are no half measures to the promises Jesus makes. There are no qualifying statements which say that if you've believed in God for a long time, you'll get more of eternal life than those who only believed in God for a short time of their life. The reward from God for hearing his call to follow is no greater for those who heard it earlier in their lives than for those who heard it much later. The depth of love and the capacity of God's love is so vast that it is not like a piece of cake which needs to be divided or a wage bill that needs to be managed.

God is able to be generous because he so loved the world - so loves us - that there is no end to that love and therefore no end to God's ability to be generous.

This is good news all round because there is no room or need for jealousy in the Christian life - however long or short a time we've been following Jesus it is not possible to be loved by God any more than we are right now, in this moment. And the reward at the end of our time on earth is eternal life - and you can't split eternity into slices to share out!

The landowner in Jesus' story called people at different times to go out to work for him. In the same way, people hear the call of God at different times in their lives. But whenever people have come to recognise that call of God in their lives, God's love for them is no lesser or greater than those who have heard the call earlier or who hear God's call later - and the ultimate reward is the same when we get to join the Kingdom of God in heaven.

One of my fondest memories as a bishop so far was when I had the privilege of confirming a gentleman who was three weeks off his 100th birthday. He'd gone to church for many years to support his wife but had never come to a place of belief for himself. When his wife had died several years before, she made him promise to keep going to church so that he would be supported by the friends they had made. He had kept his promise and had kept going to church, until, just a few weeks before his 100th birthday, it finally made sense to him - he finally heard God's call and believed. He was baptised by the vicar and I then went to confirm him.

When he died three weeks later on his 100th birthday, he died being loved by God in the same way his wife had been, and when he entered heaven there would have been as much rejoicing as there would have been for his wife who had heard the call of Jesus and worked for him all her life.

So, whether you are here this morning having heard the call of God a long time ago, or whether this is something that is really new to you, then hear again today the vastness of God's love for you and the promise of eternal life that is waiting for you.

And as we wait for that promise to become a reality for each one of us, go out into the vineyard and be bold in sharing the love of God with others, knowing that the God we speak of is a generous God whose love knows no bounds and who wishes to call all into the depth of his love.

