

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

Amazing Gospel

The story of the workers in the vineyard, all arriving at different times, is among the most startling in the Gospel. When you think how much odious comparison and petulance can infect religious communities, it is encouraging to find this spectacular evidence of the Gospel's generosity and scope. Our God is a great God.

Limitless Generosity

If you are truly a *redeemed* person – only here because you've been saved from annihilation - something ought to change within you. In our tradition, when someone saves you, *you owe him*. The awful servant who was forgiven a king's ransom of debt missed the point, continuing to live a mean and grasping existence (he tested his grasp quite early on, throttling his colleague for a petty debt). Today's Gospel looks at it from the other side: God's plan for redemption doesn't count the cost, because God *doesn't need* to count costs. We have a lot of work to do understanding this. If you've ever been in the happy position of being awash with resources when someone else is in need, it may help. It's sometimes hard to give generously, because the beneficiary hasn't understood how effortless it is for the benefactor. We can give pain by demanding acceptance of what seems too great a gift; there's a feeling of obligation which is hard to acknowledge. Human beings have to overcome this attitude, particularly towards God. Humanity cannot help being overwhelmed by the gifts of God. It's in the nature of things that we should find ourselves unable to repay or deserve God. I know that this fact disables the faith of many people, who prefer all their relationships to be accountable, who want to "pay their way". With God we can't do it. But there is a further factor to to be accepted: if we are obliged to accept the fatherhood of God in this way, we must also accept his complete freedom in the way he chooses to treat us.

Fairness In Families

Is fairness a realistic concept in families? To put it another way, do parents "treat all their children the same"? And whilst we are asking hard questions, do children treat both their parents the same? The answer has to be a resounding *no!* I imagine all parents like to think they are even-handed, but in practice it must be impossible to treat various personalities with various needs with anything like equality. How would you weigh one child's needs against the needs of an entirely different one? The

very keeping of account in such areas is obnoxious. So the saying, *God has no favourites* should not be taken to suggest that God operates like an impartial public body, regulating his goodness by statutes or rules. He is precisely *partial*, on the side of each of his creatures: Paul says, *We may be certain, after the giving of Christ, that God will not refuse us anything he can give*. Because we're unique, we're uniquely loved. There can be no calling of God to account for the disposition of his gifts.

What About The (Vineyard) Workers?

So these workers in the vineyard are keen to compare their treatment. They agree to work for a fair day's wage, but are offended when it is given to the eleventh-hour recruits as well. I think the real point of the parable comes in reflection; what dawns on us is that God is *not at all* like an employer, and we are not in any way his employees. The parable reveals to us the inadequacy of that model. A real employer would have acted differently, not out of justice, but out of self-interest. God does not need to have self-interest. The parable should close down in us the longing to put our relation with God on a purely human basis. If God allowed us to do this, we might like it better. But we would run a great risk: God might actually decide to give us, not what we need, nor even what we would like, but what we deserve.

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