

Year A Creation 3 20th September 2026

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

As we come to the third Sunday of this creation season our Exodus and Gospel readings indicate strongly that one of God's primary intentions is that there is enough for everyone to live the full and abundant life that Jesus offers us in John's Gospel.

In the Exodus passage every day there is enough manna for every family while those who ignore the instructions and try to hoard some more for themselves find it goes mouldy overnight. Don't be greedy! As an aside, whoever wrote Exodus had a wonderful sense of irony because for the Hebrew phrase 'what is it' is mahna.

In the Gospel reading Jesus turns our idea of fairness upside down, doesn't he? We are geared to think that those who work hardest, who work the longest should get the biggest rewards, while those who don't or can't lose out. That's life, life isn't fair.

Yet the evidence suggests that actually a sense of fairness and justice may well be hard-wired into us. More than 20 years ago, two scientists carried out a behavioural experiment with two capuchin monkeys.

They trained the monkeys, who were put into adjoining cages so that they could see each other, to hand over rocks in return for a cucumber. That went well and then one day, while the first monkey got a cucumber for handing over the rock, the other was given a grape for doing the same.

No problem, because the first monkey reckoned she too would get a grape the next time they did the experiment.

That's not how it worked out. The next day the first monkey was again given a cucumber in return for handing over a rock. But the

second monkey was given a grape – without having to hand over a rock.

To coin a cliché, the first monkey went absolutely ape. She threw her cucumber at her handler, rattled the bars of her cage, and metaphorically threw all the other rocks out of her pram. As far as she was concerned that was completely unfair.

There's quite a bit of metaphorical cucumber throwing in both the Exodus and Gospel readings, isn't there? Grumbling is hardly the word for it. The Israelites wanted to return to a life of slavery, with all the misery and hardship that entailed, just because they were worried about their stomachs. The early starters in the vineyard were hacked off because they felt they should be paid for the hours they had worked, irrespective of how good their work was.

So what was it that made them so angry? Why do we get so het up about unfairness as it affects us when we should be getting equally angry about injustice as it affects others? That's a tough question to answer and we'll each have our own response. More than 30 years ago American writer Frederick Buechner offered this advice about reading Scripture. Don't start looking in the Bible for the answers it gives. Start by listening for the questions it asks.

And certainly the Gospel reading asks some important questions. The labourers who started at 6 in the morning agreed a wage for the day that would have been enough to feed their families for the best part of a week. So they should have been happy.

But they weren't, were they?

They were unhappy because they thought they deserved more money than the later arrivals. What is God doing being so merciful to layabouts who can't be bothered to get up early? We can sort

of get that, but it still raises the issue of how far should mercy go when it comes up against the need for justice?

Of course we don't know that the ones who were employed later on were layabouts. Maybe there just wasn't enough work to go round that day.

Or was the landowner a bit incompetent and didn't actually know how many workers he needed that day? Or perhaps the first labourers he took on were so lazy he needed to hire more people to get the work done that needed doing.

Equally, it's possible that those taken on at teatime were available because they were disabled in some way and the other landowners had deliberately avoided employing them.

The reality is we don't know the answer to any of these questions, because Jesus doesn't tell us. All we do know is that the labourers are as much a part of God's creation as anyone and anything else.

We need to remember that people we disagree with or disapprove of are also just as much a part of creation as we are. So when we are minded to criticise them, we need to do it in a way that acknowledges that they are just as precious to God as we are.

God's scandalous goodness, God's scandalous generosity calls us to be instruments of grace to others, especially to those who offend us. God's goodness and generosity reminds us of our own stinginess and smallness. When we see someone in need on the streets, too often our instinct can be to give them the pound coin hiding at the bottom of our pocket rather than the fiver or tenner in our wallets.

When you come to think of it, in these days of an almost cashless society, carrying some real money with us is something we should make a point of doing. It's said that God helps those who help

themselves, but actually God also helps those who don't or perhaps can't help themselves.

We're happy to grab the many second chances God gives us, but the question the Bible asks is whether we have the right to be angry with God when God gives a second chance to someone we disapprove of.

I used to think it was fair to assume that the landowner is meant to be a metaphor for God and the labourers a metaphor for humankind as a whole. That is the traditional interpretation anyway. Now I am not so sure.

Maybe it's just a straightforward parable about the economics of living in first century Palestine. Jesus makes three things, I think, very clear. Firstly, he's not interested in who deserves what. Rather, need, hope and dignity trump human concepts of justice and fairness.

Being turned down for work really mattered in those days because there was no social security safety net, so no work meant no money and no money meant no food.

The second is that those who have the means have a moral responsibility to help those who don't have the means – and that imperative hasn't changed from that day to this.

The third is that God's maths isn't anything like human maths. Why else would Jesus have the landowner have those who arrived last paid first in full view of those had had worked all day?

As one commentator put it, yes the last shall be the first, and the first shall be the same – i.e. there is no hierarchy in God's kingdom and human emotions such as envy have no part in God's kingdom. Being at the front of the line, being the best, being the brightest, being the hardest worker are no guarantee of God's favour.

I don't know how many of you are familiar with the saying, 'Justice is when you get what you deserve, mercy is when you don't get what you deserve and grace is when you get what you definitely don't deserve'. Here the latecomers are definitely the recipients of grace, and in one sense the early birds get justice.

What is interesting about the Exodus reading and this parable is who is it that is envious, who is grumbling, who is bitter, who is getting no satisfaction? It's those who think they deserve to be at the front of the queue for God's beneficence.

The overriding question the parable asks us is, I think, are we offended by God's generosity? Do you think it's coincidence that the last workers were paid first? I don't, I think the landowner wanted those who saw themselves as deserving to see what radical generosity really looks like. To see what creation as God originally made and intended for us all looks like.

These stories are stories for our time too. We are having to live with the effects of human-caused climate change, with the effects of power-hungry people willing to see others die to satisfy their own cravings. People around the world are crying out for justice and equality, but we are not responding to their pain. And that's partly because we're so obsessed with life treating us fairly.

But what is good about my fairness if it leaves others in the darkness? Too often my sense of justice doesn't accord with God's sense of justice, God's awareness of need. Creation will only thrive when everyone has a place of dignity and purpose.

In conclusion the readings as a whole give rise to several further questions, but I will just touch very briefly on three. Firstly, is our faith in God such that we really do trust Him to take care of us, even to the point of living literally hand to mouth as the Israelites in the exodus were called to do. Secondly, do we really believe that God's

grace is freely and equally available to all, especially to Johnny-come-lately queue jumpers we really can't stand?

We'd like to think we would answer yes to both questions, but if we are honest with ourselves are we not sometimes just a tiny bit envious of God's generosity? Do the implications of these readings actually make us a bit annoyed with God, perhaps to the point where we run away?

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, can those cranky, awkward, self-centred, ungrateful people, who at heart are just like us, be loved by God despite, or perhaps even because of, their crankiness, awkwardness, self-centredness and ingratitude. At least the Bible's answer to that is crystal clear. I can, I do and I will – always.