

Reading: Matthew 20:1-16

There is inside of us all a sense of justice. It is at its strongest when we feel we have been hard done by.

Today's text is only found in Matthew and it plays out against this sense of justice, but as we will discover, it will take us right to the heart of Jesus message - the free and superabundant love of God.

There are workers who have worked all day in the blazing sun. Then, right at the 11th hour, the landowner finds some more workers down at the market. He employs them and then pays them just the same as the others. The workers who have laboured all day are incensed. "What do you think you are doing?" they say, "We have laboured all day and yet you pay these Johnny-come-latelys the same amount as us". But the landowner rejects their pleas. "I have paid you what I promised. What are you complaining about? Take what's yours, shut up and go. It's my money", and then the sting in the tail: "Are you jealous that I'm so generous?"

There is so much that we can make of this story.

I believe Jesus told it to teach us about God's justice and God's superabundant love.

God's ways are not our ways. God's justice is not our justice. God's justice is over and above the formality of human justice. It takes into account the greater needs of the people who in this case were unemployed. They had families and they had needs just as great as the other labourers.

This is why I am an enthusiastic supporter of the living wage. And I believe it is only right that the Church is too. We pay all our workers at St Peter's at least a living wage. "New Zealand", as the outgoing City Missioner said, "is facing a new crisis. No longer are the poor just the unemployed but so too are many workers. It's quite possible to have both partners working and the family not have enough to live on. This is wrong." In God's economy your needs are taken care of.

But the real heart of the story is the difference between our sense of justice and God's superabundant love. It's very like the jealousy of another character in one of Jesus stories: the elder brother in the parable of the Prodigal Son. "I have been with you all these years father, and you have never bothered with me and yet here's this wayward, good-for-nothing son and he comes home and you kill the fattened calf."

In another parish I met this very same attitude. It was around the funeral of an estranged parishioner. I had offered the family to hold the service in the church. "Why should they be buried from the church?" one parishioner told me, "They have done nothing to support the place. Let them go to a funeral home." We need to examine ourselves and our attitudes.

I was staggered to hear on the radio that New Zealand issued 200,000 work visas last year, the biggest number in our history. How do we feel about these Johnny-come-latelys? Are we open and accepting of them, reflecting God's great love to them? Or, are we secretly (and maybe openly) resentful of them taking our jobs?

God's love, when it is really practiced and experienced in our lives, always has this over-and-aboveness to it. It is so huge it catches us off guard, with its enormity.

After the fall of apartheid in South Africa, the government, under the chairmanship of Archbishop Desmond Tutu set up the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. This Commission went throughout the country, and indeed has been copied as a model in many, many other countries. They would bring together the victim and the oppressor and try and bring about justice.

This one day a young white policeman was on trial. He was accused of taking two black men (a father and son), at gunpoint, down to the local river and shooting them, for no reason. You can imagine the scene in

the room. The white man was forced to listen to the story. So too was the wife and mother of the murdered victims. While the account was read out, the members of the woman's church sung Amazing Grace quietly in the background. "What could we do that would possibly bring justice in this situation for you?" Tutu asked of the black woman. To gasps from the audience she said, "I totally and completely forgive this man. He is as much a victim of apartheid as any of us here. But," she said, "one of the men you killed was my only son. I would like to claim this man as my son. Could he visit me each Sunday afternoon, as my son once did. That would be justice for me." The young man; well, he fainted!