

Does it not matter?

Some people seem to lead easy lives characterised by privilege, wealth and fulfilment. They put in very little effort and everything is handed to them. There are others who are born, live and die in poverty and distress no matter the efforts they make, nor the skills and intelligence they possess, nor the generosity of heart they show.

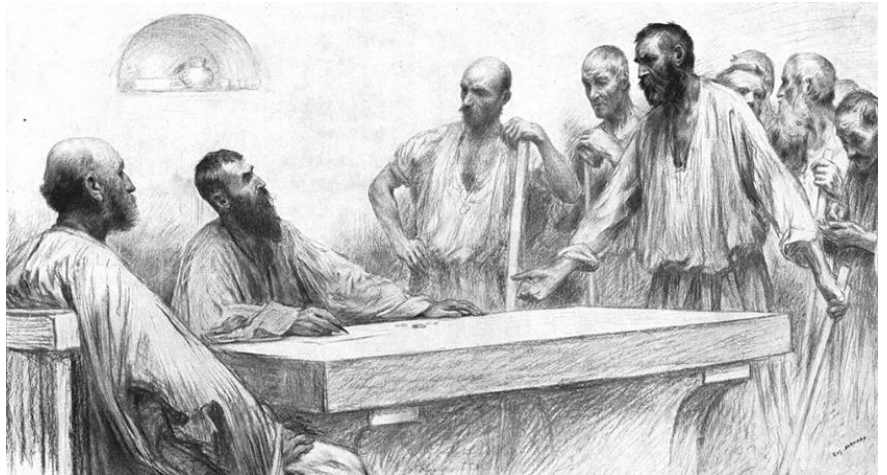
It seems so unjust.

To compound this unfairness we have today's parable that seems to say that God pays us the same, no matter how much or little we try.

In a way, it is because the landowner is unable to pay any of the workers more than a denarius. This is not because he has insufficient money.

The bailiff was told to pay the workers in reverse order to draw out a truth.

He starts with those who came last leading those who had laboured in all the heat to expect to get more than the those who had done a short shift.



It is all about the kingdom of heaven, and the day's wage is something to do with receiving the rewards of God's reign. To share in these is not really about being given money.

It is about happiness and fulfilment.

In heaven we are filled to the brim, and no matter how much we have done we cannot squeeze in another drop of joy. A bucket can never be more full than its capacity no matter much water is poured in.

Sometimes artists have painted heaven as layers rising up to God or concentric circles surrounding him. The greater the saint the higher or closer they are in the order of things.



What if you are one of those saints on the outer ring or lower down? Would it be possible to grow jealous of those nearer to God?

We recognise that these works of art are attempts show the unshowable. We cannot imagine what heaven is really like. If we wish to say that some are 'higher', 'closer' or 'deeper' we should understand that these are human terms trying to express the divine.

It is perhaps easier to say that we shall be equally happy; that is, full of happiness. In heaven, none of us can be happier than another.



It is tempting to see this parable as being about graduated or measured rewards given to workers. It sounds like the world of work in which we calculate the number of hours put in, the kind of work done and the rate of pay.

It is about the kingdom of heaven; and heaven is not like that.

Someone might object that it would have been simpler if Jesus had used a different setting for his parable.

If Jesus wanted to tell us about God's overwhelming generosity of filling us all completely with his love and happiness then he should have avoided a setting that prompts us to think about effort put in and reward received.

Maybe he did it deliberately. Using this parable he challenges our assumptions about heaven.

Heaven is not a reward for how much we have done. It is not a payment recognising our efforts and commitment. It is pure gift and no matter much work we put in we cannot earn it or deserve it.

No one can deserve more from God on account of their having tried harder or because they achieved more than others.

We can, of course, storm off and refuse the payment, going back out to the market-place to find another employer. The trouble is, the truth is, no one else can give that denarius or give us more.

Our greatest lesson to learn is that God loves us all - even those who do not deserve him. We may be tempted to complain and he replies,

'Why be envious because I am generous?'

