

Sunday 20th September 2026. Benefice Holy Communion, Ampleforth

In our Gospel today we have a theme which could be entitled, “Grace Beyond Fairness”. Jesus tells of a landowner who goes out early in the morning to hire labourers for his vineyard. Imagine a crowd waiting in the marketplace, each person hoping to be chosen. Who would be hired first? Perhaps those who looked strongest, stood nearest the front, or seemed most experienced. The landowner agrees a day’s wage with some and sends them to work. Then he returns at nine, at noon, at three, and even at five o’clock, hiring more each time.

Now place yourself among those not chosen in the morning. You need the money. Bills are waiting, food is running low, and every passing hour deepens your anxiety. Noon comes, but there is no work. Three o’clock comes, and still you wait. By five, you are preparing to return home empty-handed. Then the landowner appears once more and says, “You also go and work in my vineyard.” It will be only an hour’s labour, but at least it is something.

When evening comes, the last workers are paid first. To their astonishment, each receives a full day’s wage. They can go home with food for their families. They have received far more than they expected. Yet when those hired first receive the same amount, they complain. They had worked through the heat of the day. Surely, they deserved more. The landowner answers that he has not cheated them: he has paid exactly what was promised. His generosity to others has taken nothing from them. This is the scandal of God’s generosity.

This parable unsettles us because we like a world in which effort is measured and rewards are carefully distributed. Work hard, and you should receive more. Do less, and you should receive less. There is wisdom in fairness, but Jesus exposes how quickly fairness can become envy. The first workers are not angry because they received too little; they are angry because someone else received unexpected kindness.

We can become so focused on what we deserve that we fail to see life from the viewpoint of those who cannot catch a break. Some people are willing to work but are never chosen. Some begin with fewer opportunities, heavier burdens, or doors already closed. When mercy finally reaches them, who are we to complain? God's generosity is not an insult to the faithful; it is hope for the weary.

So where do we see ourselves in this parable? Its message reaches beyond our understanding of economics. It reveals the kingdom of God. To understand it, we must stop imagining that we are always the workers hired first.

Spiritually, we are the ones still standing in the marketplace when the day is almost over. We have not earned God's welcome. We have loved too little, served imperfectly, and left much good undone. Yet Christ calls us into the vineyard and promises a place in the kingdom.

None of us earns grace. We may compare ourselves with a neighbour and decide that we have worked longer or behaved better, but comparison cannot save us. The thief beside Jesus had no lifetime of service to offer, only a desperate prayer, and still he heard a promise of paradise. That is the nature of grace: it is gift, not wages. It overturns our calculations and leaves no room for pride.

How, then, should we respond? We should receive and then reflect God's grace to all; in the way we live. First, receive God's grace humbly. We come with empty hands, trusting what Christ has done rather than presenting our achievements. Second, receive it gratefully. Every blessing is a reason for praise, not a basis for superiority. Third, reflect that grace generously. If God has been patient with us, we can be patient with others. If God welcomes the latecomer, we can make room for those whom the world overlooks.

The last will be first and the first will be last, but all who depend on God's grace will be welcomed home. At the end of the day, we will discover that the Master is better than fair: he is merciful and His grace unceasing. Let us rejoice therefore rejoice when grace reaches another person, rest when grace reaches us and serve faithfully for as long as daylight remains.

Thanks be to God. Amen.