

One Sunday a couple of years ago, when our granddaughter Jemima was about three, the family came over for Sunday lunch. Jemima had been a very good girl, and eaten all her dinner, but she didn't want dessert.

Later, while we were having coffee, I felt rather sorry for her. Everyone else had enjoyed something sweet except for her. Four Lindt chocolate bunnies sat on the bookshelf; Antony had been given three months earlier, so I thought I could safely give one to Jemima.

Antony came into the room just as she opened the wrapper. He looked at her and said, "Oh!" At three years old, Jemima understood immediately what the "Oh!" meant and held the chocolate bunny out to him.

Antony said to her, "Shall we sit down and share it?"

"Yes, Grandad," she replied.

Even at three, Jemima had a strong sense of fairness. If the bunny belonged to Grandad, she couldn't simply eat it because Nanna had given it to her. And Grandad knew that sharing was better than guarding a three-month-old chocolate rabbit. Well, I think he did!

That instinct for fairness appears remarkably early. Anyone who has spent time with small children will have heard, "That's not fair!" when another child gets the larger piece of cake.

To be honest, I don't think we entirely grow out of it.

That is why this parable unsettles us. We sympathise with those who began at dawn, laboured through the heat, and watched people who worked only one hour receive the same wage. We can almost hear them thinking, "If they have been given that much, just think what we are going to receive." Then their turn

comes, and they receive the agreed wage of one denarius. It doesn't seem fair.

At the end of the chapter before our Gospel reading, Peter voices the same concern. He says to Jesus, "Look, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?"

Peter's question is understandable. The disciples have left their homes and livelihoods to follow Jesus, and he wants to know what their sacrifice will mean for them.

Peter is still learning what it means to follow Jesus, and he has not yet experienced the cross and resurrection. Jesus is preparing him and the other disciples for a life they do not yet understand.

Jesus replies, "Many who are first will be last, and the last will be first." He then tells the parable we heard this morning, showing Peter that discipleship is not a matter of calculating what we have given and what God owes us.

The story begins with the owner hiring workers for the usual daily wage. He returns at nine, noon and three and does the same thing. Then, with only an hour left, he goes out again. He finds people still waiting and asks, "Why are you standing here idle all day?"

Their answer: "Because no one has hired us."

There is no suggestion that they are lazy. They have waited all day, hoping someone will choose them but Each time, somebody else was selected.

Their words carry a certain sadness: "No one has hired us."

It reminded me of standing on the school field waiting to be picked for the netball team. Do you remember that? I was usually one of those left until the end. It has scarred me for life! Perhaps that's why I took up running and cycling as an adult. I'll show them!

I think many of us know that horrible feeling in the stomach when we are not chosen, when our gifts don't seem to be needed, or when everyone else has been invited in and we are still standing there.

The owner says to those who remain, "You also go into the vineyard." Their day is nearly over, yet they too are called, valued and included.

At the end of the day, those hired last each receive one denarius, the usual daily wage—enough to support a family for that day. Those who began at dawn see this and expect to receive more. Yet they too receive one denarius and their complaint is interesting: "You have made them equal to us."

The latecomers have been treated as their equals. The owner replies, "Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage?" He has acted justly towards them and generously towards the others.

Then comes the owner's searching question: "Are you envious because I am generous?" More literally, "Is your eye evil because I am good?" Has my goodness towards somebody else changed the way you see your own blessings?

This evening our Jewish neighbours will begin Yom Kippur, the Jewish Day of Atonement. Jewish people will gather for prayer, fasting and repentance, seeking God's mercy and the healing of relationships.

During the afternoon service on Yom Kippur, the Book of Jonah is traditionally read. Jonah is sent to Nineveh, a city he fears and despises. When its people repent, God shows mercy; but Jonah sits outside the city angry that compassion has reached people he would rather keep at a distance.

God asks Jonah, "Is it right for you to be angry?", echoing the landowner's question to the labourers: "Are you envious because I am generous?" Jonah resents mercy shown to Nineveh; the first workers resent generosity shown to the latecomers. In both readings, God asks whether our sense of fairness has become too small for his mercy.

That is why Jonah belongs beside today's Gospel. He has to learn that people are not abstractions, enemies, latecomers or rivals for God's attention. Their hunger, fear, regret and hope are seen by God. Yom Kippur reminds us that all of us depend on mercy; and once we know that, grace becomes a gift received with humility and shared with generosity.

The landowner does more than pay wages. He notices the reality before him. If those hired at five received only one hour's pay, their families would still go hungry. His generosity is practical compassion: he enters their situation and gives what is needed for life. The first workers see only the amount in another person's hand, not the need behind it.

Writing from prison, Paul has lost status, freedom and comfort for the gospel. Yet he does not ask what he will receive for all he has given. His life belongs to Christ: "For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain."

Paul longs to depart and be with Christ, which he says would be "far better". Yet he recognises that remaining alive would serve the Philippians better: "To remain in the flesh is more necessary for you."

Paul shows where Peter's journey of discipleship is leading. Life in Christ turns us outward. It teaches us to ask not only, "What am I owed?" but, "What does this person need, and how might Christ be asking me to serve them?"

That is what "living is Christ" looks like. Christ's love begins to shape our own. We cannot meet people's needs from a safe distance, or simply by deciding what seems fair to us.

We have to draw near enough to listen, understand something of their lives, and recognise the mercy or help that is needed.

I thought about this after the performance of *Educating Rita* in our church hall. Some people were understandably uncomfortable with the swearing and the blasphemous moments. Yet the play drew us into lives marked by longing, disappointment and change: one person reaching towards growth, and another gradually disintegrating into despair. As a priest, I hear all sorts of things from people who do not share our faith. When Christians mix only with other Christians, we can lose touch with the language and longings of the world around us. Christ calls us to step into that reality with humility: not to approve everything, but to understand where people are wounded, searching or afraid, and to bring the hope that he can restore what is breaking and lead us into new life.

So the question becomes less, "Is this fair to me?" and more, "Whose reality am I being asked to enter? Who has been waiting to be noticed, chosen, forgiven or helped?"

It may mean welcoming the latecomer, standing beside someone who is struggling, or listening patiently beneath all the expletives and asking, with real attentiveness, "What do you need me to do for you?"

Jemima and Antony give us a final glimpse of that. Jemima offered the chocolate bunny back, and Antony invited her to share it. What began as ownership became fellowship — and perhaps that is why chocolate bunnies taste better when shared. Amen

Let us pray to God, whose mercy is generous and whose love reaches out to every person.

Heavenly Father, we pray for your Church throughout the world. Give us generous hearts, ready to welcome, encourage and serve. Where your Church has become divided by status, tradition or disagreement, draw your people together again in Christ. Help us to recognise the gifts of those who are new among us, to notice those who are standing at the edges, and to make room for all whom you call.

We pray for this parish of St Mary's. Thank you for those who have worshipped and served here over many years, and for those who have joined us more recently. Show each of us where our gifts may be used, where someone needs encouragement, and where a simple act of kindness may make another person feel that they belong.

Lord, in your mercy,
hear our prayer.

God of all peoples, as Yom Kippur begins this evening, we pray for our Jewish neighbours and for Jewish communities throughout the world. May this sacred time of prayer, fasting and repentance bring renewal and peace. We pray for greater understanding between people of different faiths and for all who work patiently to overcome prejudice, hatred and fear.

We pray especially for places where ancient wounds and present conflicts have brought suffering. Give wisdom to those entrusted with leadership, courage to those working for peace, protection to those living in danger, and compassion for all whose lives have been torn apart by violence.

Lord, in your mercy,
hear our prayer.

God of justice and compassion, we pray for those who wait each day hoping to be chosen: those seeking work, those struggling to provide for their families, and those who feel their abilities are overlooked or unwanted.

We remember people who live with the anxiety of wondering whether there will be enough — enough money, enough food, somewhere secure to live, someone to help. Give us eyes to see the needs around us and generous hearts in responding to them.

We pray for those who feel left behind or excluded; for the lonely, for those whose relationships have broken down, and for anyone who feels there is no place where they truly belong. Bring alongside them people who will listen, welcome and care.

Lord, in your mercy,
hear our prayer.

Loving God, we bring before you those who are ill or anxious, those awaiting treatment or test results, and those caring for someone they love. We remember especially those known to us who need our prayers today.

[Names may be offered.]

Give strength to those who are weary, courage to those who are afraid, and your peace to those who face an uncertain future. Bless all who care for them, at home, in hospital and in our community.

Lord, in your mercy,
hear our prayer.

God of life, we remember before you those who have died,
giving thanks for all that was good in their lives and for the love
we shared with them.

[Names may be offered.]

As Paul longed to be with Christ, keep us in the hope of the
resurrection and bring us at the last, with all your people, into the
fullness of your presence.

We remember those who grieve, especially where loss is recent
or an anniversary brings memories close again. Surround them
with your love and give them companions for the journey.

Lord, in your mercy,
hear our prayer.

And in a moment of quiet, we offer to God the people and
situations that are particularly upon our hearts today.

Silence

Generous God, everything we have comes from you. Take our
time, our gifts, our possessions and our lives, and show us how
they may be used in your service. Teach us to receive your grace
with gratitude and to share your love freely, so that in all we do
we may show something of the generosity of Christ.

Merciful Father,
**accept these prayers for the sake of your Son, our Saviour
Jesus Christ. Amen.**