

The sports season has arrived with the changing of the seasons. Football, soccer, rugby, and Aussie Rules, you name it, they are all in full swing. Depending on which sport you play, or support, it's truly a great time for sports.

For many, it has already begun. When Rugby and football are among our favourite sports, the excitement around the games continues to build. We love the sports we support, and we also express our competitive spirit when we come to cheer for our teams.

We only support our team; we don't celebrate when the other team wins. We can be very competitive when it comes to supporting our own team. We want our team to score and win. When the other team wins, we get upset. In some parts of the world, people can have brutal fights over sports; in extreme cases, even wars can happen.

Sports, legal matters, social activities, and religious beliefs all have one thing in common: they strive for fairness. When they follow their rules, things must be fair, equal, and just. They must operate under the principle of fairness.

These guidelines bring peace and maintain the systems that run games, communities, and nations. When people follow the principle of fairness, everyone gets along well. When there is inequality or unfairness, rivalry and conflict are inevitable.

The community in the gospel story in Matthew 20 this morning strongly supports a fair go. It is a way of life for them, both in their workplace and in terms of being paid.

We don't see brutal fighting or war in the story because of unfairness, but the workers in the vineyard do complain about fairness and the idea of a fair go.

In the story, Jesus uses what seems like unfairness from a human perspective to explain the fairness, and the nature of the kingdom of God, or how He deals with people when He provides grace or needs to them.

In the parable, a landowner hires a number of casual workers at the marketplace. In the marketplace, you can find skilled workers, physically strong workers, workers who are good with numbers, and all kinds of labourers.

At 6 a.m., the landowner hires workers and negotiates a wage of one denarius, which was the normal daily wage for 12 hours. He chooses workers who are strong, smart, and skilled. Both the owner and the workers are happy.

Then, at 9 a.m., 12 noon, and 3 p.m., the owner goes to the marketplace again and hires more workers. They might not be as strong as the ones he hired in the morning, but they are reasonably happy. Again, at 5 p.m., just one hour before the end of the workday, he goes to the marketplace and finds more people there. He wonders why they are still there. They must be desperate to work—perhaps more than desperate—because they are still looking for work at 5 p.m., very close to finishing time. The owner hires them as well.

At 6 p.m., when the work is finished, the workers are paid. They receive exactly what the vineyard owner had promised: one denarius. The ones who started at 6 a.m. look at the other workers, who had started at different times but still received the same wage. They had worked fewer hours yet were paid the same amount. They say, “It’s not fair.”

The owner is condemned, and what seemed like a generous act now appears as injustice.

This is the kind of issue that would shock a workers' union or appear on current affairs.

Some people might even say it is like a joke. But here we have the owner's defense in the story: "You were happy to agree with my generous offer. Why, then, should you complain? It's my money. I can handle it in the way that makes me happy."

What seems fair to the master is not fair at all to the workers in the vineyard.

If we look at this story in economic terms, the conflict is clear. The more you work, the more you should be paid. Not only that, but the higher your position, the higher your wage. The higher your degree, the more you get paid. The more experience you have, the more you earn. This is how things work in the economic system of this world—except in the kingdom of God.

If you look at this story in terms of salvation, it doesn't matter when you come to faith; the heavenly reward is the same.

It is like Christians who have been faithful for a long time complaining that their reward should be greater than those who came to faith last minutes.

In the parable, Jesus shows a vision of His kingdom, where the people of God are expected to live in a context of equality.

The concept of equality is illustrated in the story of God's provision of manna in the wilderness.

After the people of Israel escaped from Egypt and crossed the Red Sea, their life in the desert was neither special nor luxurious.

God provided manna and quail daily for everyone, and no one collected more than the daily amount.

Each person gathered exactly what they needed.

Whether one was stronger or weaker, powerful or not, richer or poorer, food and meat were provided equally for all.

This shows us that God's love and grace are given to everyone. He is very fair. God provides our daily bread and meets our basic needs, equally and for all.

This is the vision God offers us: that our basic needs should be provided equally.

In the parable of the generous vineyard owner, the kingdom of God deals with everyone generously.

Anyone who comes, willing to serve in this kingdom, will be accepted and blessed. They will receive something far better than mere justice: they will receive love, generosity, and the overflowing mercy of God.

This is what Jesus proclaimed during His disputes with the Pharisees and teachers of the law, saying, "The first will be last, and the last will be first."

In Jesus' society, those considered first—people with power, authority, riches, and influence—were regarded as first. Meanwhile, the poor, the isolated, the outcasts, and the weak were considered last.

From the world's perspective, the first are those who deserve to be served, respected, and rewarded for their hard work and success. Yet, in the kingdom of God, even those who seem to deserve their success can become last, and the last can become first.

Opportunity is given to everyone; even if someone fails the first time, another chance is offered. God welcomes us with forgiveness again and again. May be with seventy time seven?

The kingdom of God is a place where God accepts people regardless of who they are, and anyone can receive the grace and love of God.

The kingdom of God is where God gives according to His generosity. It is a place we can enter even without any earthly achievements. Gifts are given according to His grace.

Jesus reveals the one God who will always have mercy and abundant pardon. He is like a patiently watching father, seeing us while we are still a long way off—a father who greets the prodigal son or daughter and welcomes them home with open arms.

Whether we come to believe earlier than others, discover God's love later, or commit our lives to the church sooner or later, God equally promises eternal life and the kingdom of God to the first and the last alike.

If we think we deserve special treatment from God because of our hard work, long attendance in church, or loyalty to Him and His church, we are missing the vision of the kingdom of God.

God loves us equally. He loves and treats us according to His generosity and in light of our circumstances. The message we hear from this passage is that we should not be proud of ourselves for being first, and we should not compare ourselves with others. Instead, we should be generous, just as God has been generous to us and has welcomed us.

God speaks to us straightforward about how to live in the kingdom of God. He is a fair God who gives according to His generosity and His Promise.

God is a fair God, who keeps His fairness applied to everyone. He wants us to promote His fairness, which can be found in his Kingdom of God.

This is what we are called to do in the world where we live. It stretches our capacity beyond our limitations.

Jesus says, "Freely you have received; freely give." That is a pretty fair statement from not only from Jesus, but everyone's perspective.

Amen.