

And God said, Let there be light: and there was light. Genesis 1:3

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All things were made by him; and without him was not anything made that was made.

Those words are the words that the Apostle John used to describe the indescribable; to speak with amazing brevity and incredible beauty of the mystery of Creation.

All things were made by him; and without him was not anything made that was made.

Those words are John's attempt to explain what the author of the Book of Genesis was saying when he wrote about the first day of creation; that day when God spoke light into existence. God spoke a word and there was light.

So, when John, centuries and centuries later, was trying to come to grips with who Jesus was, and where Jesus had come from, he spoke not of Mary and Joseph; not of Nazareth or Bethlehem; not of angels or shepherds or magi.

He spoke of the Word. The Word which was from the beginning.¹ The Word which was God and was with God. The Word through whom God created all things, without exception. The Word, as we hear each year on Christmas Day, which became flesh and dwelt among us. The Word which, from the beginning, has been at work in us and in every part of the Creation, without exception.

And God said, Let there be light: and there was light.

If you had a choice, which would you prefer: that God be fair or that God be gracious? That's the question that we are left with each and every time we heard the parable of the labourers in the vineyard, as we do each and every year on Septuagesima Sunday. Would it be better for God to be fair? Or would it be better for God to be gracious.

And I suppose that our answer to that question will depend on what we think we most need. On what people now like to call our hierarchy of needs.

In so many ways this parable offends us. Maybe it gets under our skin. Maybe we're uncomfortable with a story which is so obviously unfair.

A story where the apparently lazy, good for nothing riff raff, as I suspect many like to call them, who sleep in late in the morning and only get to the market place in the last hours of the day; who work just one measly hour, are given exactly the same amount, the very same wage, that those who worked from the very beginning of the day; who worked all 12 hours, doing the hard, back-breaking labour of harvesting; who bore 'the burden and heat of the day', as they're quick to tell the lord of the vineyard.

And maybe we're offended not just at these lazy types. Maybe we're just as much offended at the landowner, who chooses to pay the labourers from last to first; almost as if he wants to rub his so-called generosity in the face of the good ones who worked the whole day; who, if he had paid them first, would have been long gone

¹ John 1:1-14; 1 John 1:1

before the others got paid. The almost belligerent landowner who challenges the hard-working ones right back when they question him: "*is your eye evil,*" he asks them, "*[is your eye evil] because I am good.*"

Arrogantly taking upon himself the Divine Name; the unspeakable Name that God spoke to Moses from the midst of the Burning Bush: *I am.*

Isn't there something in all of us that wants to take the side of the hardworking ones; the ones who got up early in order to get to work on time; the ones who didn't knock off part way through the day; the ones who patiently had to wait even longer while the latecomers were paid first.

Wouldn't we all feel much the same way that they felt if we were in their place?

And maybe we can all imagine a moment when we were in much the same kind of place; when we showed up to the job before the others did; when we worked away at the task without complaint; when we cleaned up the mess that someone else had made; when that other one was rewarded for the job that we did or were credited with the idea that we had. It happens all the time.

And in a world where everything seems absolutely finite; where there's only so much money and so much time and so much of this and so much of that, doesn't it seem incredibly unfair for someone to get something that they didn't work for; something that they didn't earn?

But what about Easter? What about the Resurrection?

Isn't the story of Christ's death on Good Friday and his rising from the dead on Easter Day all about getting the very thing, the one thing, that we could never earn?

Isn't that what this journey that we're about to take – our Lenten journey to the Cross – all about discovering how Christ does all the work for us? The Christ, who is the only one who has actually been working from the very beginning of the day; from the very beginning of the very first day. The Christ through whom the earth and the stars and the plants and the animals and even us, were spoken into creation.

I don't know when you showed up to do this work; maybe at the third hour; maybe at the sixth. I don't know when you showed up to work; long before I did, I'm sure of that.

But I do know this: that only one has been working from the very beginning of the day; and precisely because, and only because, he's been working from the beginning of the very first day to the end of that final day on Golgotha, the twelfth hour of humanity's day; that day on the Cross; precisely because he worked the whole day, I have the hope of forgiveness; I have the possibility of Resurrection.

So rather than being offended by such a generous, gracious landowner, who goes out of his way, over and over and over again, to go back to the marketplace; to seek the stragglers and the worthless; always looking; always searching; always calling, always willing to give the lazy and the late another chance; always willing to give the riff raff, the leftovers, the ones that no one else wants, like me, one more chance to respond.

Is it better for God to be fair? Or is it better for God to be gracious? I don't know what the answer is from where you're sitting; but from where I'm standing it isn't even close. If God were only fair, I wouldn't have a hope. But he's gracious. And for that, and for that alone, I give thanks.