

Group Notes 25 September 2011
Back to Church Sunday

Welcome - Ice Breaker

Describe your best friend. What are the qualities that have inspired your friendship?

Word – Matthew 20:1-16 (Please note this is the reading from Church Hill Praise)

This story of Jesus seems so unfair! As anyone who has ever worked for a living knows, you just can't go round paying people who've worked 12 hours the same as those who have worked only one. There'd be riots! Is Jesus trying to justify the unjustifiable? Doesn't he believe in fairness?

Question 1:

- ***Have you ever been unfairly treated at work? How did you feel?***

Let me tell the story of a different kind of fairness. I grew up as one of four brothers:-

- Ian the eldest – conscientious, hard-working, sometimes ill and away in hospital
- Colin next – head in the clouds, nose in a book, hopelessly impractical
- Andrew – the naughty one: beer-swilling, rugby playing, just wanting to have a good time, not that bothered about the consequences
- Douglas the youngest, much younger and smaller than the rest of us, inclined to play the "baby of the family" card.

We were a handful for my mum! Not least because everything had to be shared out fairly. If mum baked a cake, we had to have exactly the same size portion, to the nearest millimetre. If someone gave us some sweets or money to share between us, we each had to have exactly the same amount. Trouble came quick if the cash or the Smarties were not exactly divisible by four.

Question 2:

Where do you come in your family? Eldest? Youngest? In between? Only child? What effect do you think it has had on you?

But did we all *deserve* the same size piece of cake? Well, no...

- Ian probably deserved the most, he was conscientious, well-behaved and did what he was told
- Andrew definitely deserved the least! He was always getting into trouble!
- Douglas might have deserved a lot but he was too little to eat as much cake as his big brothers
- I probably didn't deserve very much as I always forgot my turn to do the washing up

So we *didn't* deserve the same amount of cake. Yet my mum persisted in giving us equal portions and insisted that this was fair. So why is it *unfair* when the master gives the workers the same amount regardless of what they deserved, but *fair* for my mum to give my brothers and me the same amount regardless of what we deserved?

The answer, of course, is in the relationship. Mum doesn't reward us on the basis of what we have done or not done. She rewards us on the basis of who we are. It is because we are all her children that my mum gives my brothers and me the same treatment as each other. She rewards us because she loves us, not because we have deserved it.

Jesus is saying that God treats us in the same way my mum treats her kids. God does not reward us according to what we do, but according to who we are. We are not primarily His workers but His children (though He certainly may call us to work for Him). He gives us an equal share of His blessing because He loves us equally. Some people cannot work – they are ill. Does God love them less?

Question 3:

- *What are the rewards of being a Christian?*
- *Is it right to want to be rewarded?*

But many people feel that life itself has been unfair to them. Perhaps things have gone painfully wrong in their lives and God feels far away. How can it be that God loves them when they struggle to deal with their pain or to find any meaning or purpose in their lives? How can we help such people?

In Jesus' story, the reward is given equally to all the workers because God loves them equally. But they do not receive it unconditionally (even if it is given unconditionally). When the master goes into the market place and hires the workers, they are free to say, "we are not interested" or "we'd sooner work for a different master" (or not have a master at all), or "we like it here and we're not coming." Those workers who will not respond to the Master's call will not receive his reward either. Jesus' picture of the unhired workers standing aimlessly about with nothing to do and nowhere to go tells us that He sees life without God as an unattractive and pointless option. If we want to know God's love we must receive it on His terms – by hearing and responding to His call.

Question 4:

- *Do you think life without God is pointless?*
- *Why do you think people might want to reject God's call?*

It was Back to Church Sunday. Of course it's not really just the church we want to call people back to. It's the Lord. By itself, the Church is pointless. It only becomes relevant when people meet with Jesus among us. That's what the church is for.

Question 5:

- *How well can people see and hear Jesus through us?*
- *What things hinder His call from being heard through us?*
- *What can we do about those things?*

Worship ideas.

Give everyone pencil and paper. Ask everyone to write an acronym for God's Love, eg

- Gracious
- Overwhelming
- Deep
- Satisfying
- Long lasting
- Oceanic
- Very
- Exciting

Share them!

Works/witness.

- Do you know of anyone who came to Back to Church Sunday? Or who is planning to come to Alpha? Pray for them.