



On your marks

One of the most often repeated sayings of Jesus is 'The first shall be last and the last shall be first'. This is a massive challenge to the way things usually work in this world, but again and again we discover that the kingdom of God turns everything upside down. During his ministry, Jesus regularly demonstrated what this paradox might look like in the way he showed God's love to the social outcast, the unloved stranger and even the hated enemy. The following session looks at Jesus' parable of the workers in the vineyard and explores what it may tell us about God's take on 'the first' and 'the last'.

Get set

Many of Jesus' parables give us insights into what 'the kingdom of heaven' is like - and this one is no exception. And, like other parables too, it has an unexpected twist that challenges us to stop and listen, simply because it sounds so unfair. Jesus was brilliant at telling stories his audience wouldn't easily forget. This story still upsets people and is guaranteed to get your group or congregation talking. This session is a good example of one where you as leader need to be as open and ready to learn something new as those you are leading.

You can find a retelling of the story from Matthew 20:1 - 16 in **The Barnabas Children's Bible** (story 290).

You will need a selection of the following items:

- a box of chocolates
- plenty of 5p coins
- matchsticks with their heads removed
- collage materials
- a simple board game (for example, Ludo or Snakes and Ladders)
- a bag of grapes

Go!

Choose a way into the session or service from the following suggestions.

1. Most people - and especially children - have a strong sense of right and wrong, and are particularly upset at any hint of unfairness. Give everyone a moment to think about any unfair situations they know of and then start a game where each person begins a sentence with 'I think it's unfair that...' and has to repeat what the previous person has said and then add an unfairness of their own. Begin with: 'I think it's unfair that some footballers get paid more than nurses.'

Today's session is about some people who ended up saying 'It's not fair!'

2. If you dare, start off the session by opening a box of chocolates and then deliberately sharing them very unfairly with your group (or congregation). Beware: it could cause quite a reaction, so have some spare chocolates ready to make up for the unfairness in the end.

Today's session is about feelings linked to unfairness.

3. Explain that you have a surprise for everyone and that it's 'first come first served'. Ask everyone (or everyone from one area of the church) to form a queue. After the scuffle has died down and there is an orderly queue, surprise everyone by asking them all to turn around and face the opposite way. Now walk to the back of the queue, which has become the front.

In today's story the big surprise was that the first became last and the last were first.

Telling the story

In order to encourage new viewpoints on a familiar story, retell it using the following technique.

Explore this story with some simple play acting of the five groups of workers who were hired. With a small group, this may mean just one person taking the part of each group. All five groups should be sat lounging on the ground (or in their seats) waiting for work – the casual labour market was a common sight in first-century Israel as not everyone could afford land of their own. Select someone to be a time-keeper, ringing a bell or making a mobile alarm go off every minute to represent every hour of the 12-hour day. Use 5p pieces for the 'silver coins', which were a day's wages.

- Set the first group off picking grapes, promising a silver coin for their day's work.
- After three hours, set off the second group picking grapes, promising them a fair wage.
- After another three hours, set off the third group picking grapes, promising them a fair wage.
- After another three hours, set off the fourth group picking grapes, promising them a fair wage.
- After another two hours, set off the fifth group picking grapes, promising them a fair wage.
- After one more hour, on the final alarm or bell, all should stop working, because it's pay time!
- The first group has been picking grapes for the longest but start by giving a silver coin to those in the last group, who have only worked one hour, and which leads the others to expect more.
- Now give one silver coin to each of those in the other groups. What is their reaction?
- Give the response of the owner to this unfairness – namely, 'It's what you agreed to and why shouldn't I be generous with my money, if I want to be?'

Talking about the story

What a strange story! Today, the vineyard owner would probably get in trouble with the unions for treating his workers unfairly, and with the bosses for managing his business foolishly. In human terms, he is behaving very oddly. So what is Jesus trying to say?

We need to remember that this parable is about the kingdom of heaven, so the audience would recognise that the vineyard owner is God, just as Israel is often described as God's vineyard.

Use the following open-ended questions for groups of people to discuss or talk about each question in turn as a group together. Ask them to come up with what they think might be the answers. What do their answers tell us about what God is like? And what might any possible answers say about us?

- Was it really unfair that the first group got what they agreed to?
- How was it unfair to the last group? But how is that unfairness different?
- Is there a danger of thinking that heaven is a 'first come, first served' sort of place?
- What does this parable say heaven is like?
- Why might that upset some people?
- What is this parable saying about God?
- Do you think that maybe the disciples, who were listening, had begun to think that they were 'the first' and that therefore they deserved more from God?
- What does this say about God's love for the world?
- What is this parable saying to you and me, right now?

Playing with the story

Choose one or two activities from the following suggestions.

1. Give out ten matchsticks with the phosphorous heads removed to each member of the group and challenge them to create the word LAST in digital lettering. Next, ask them to turn this into the word FIRST in a similar style - they will be three matchsticks short. Offer them the three matchsticks arranged initially in the shape of a cross - Jesus' life and death means that the last can come first.
2. Create a 'kingdom of heaven' collage with lots of everyday examples of first and last things reversed, such as: traffic lights with green at the top and red at the bottom; a backwards alphabet; their names spelled with the first and last letters reversed; trees with roots in the air and branches in the ground; bronze - silver - gold as 1st, 2nd and 3rd; a bicycle crossing the winning line before a car, before a plane; a tortoise before a hare... and so on.
3. Play a simple board game (Ludo, Snakes and Ladders) where the winner is the one who comes last! ('Go for Broke' works on this principle.)
4. In the sports world, losers often attract applause for the sheer effort they put into the race. Tell the story of some of these - for example, Eddy the Eagle or Eric the Eel, or the very moving story of Derek Redmond's 400 m race at the Barcelona Olympics.

Reflecting on the story

Gather in a circle or, if in church, invite those sitting near each other to do the following prayer exercise.

Cut up a bag of grapes into lots of smaller bunches and place them somewhere everyone can see them.

Heaven isn't about first and last; God's love is for everyone equally. This was the scandal of this



story at the time and it still makes us think!

Hand out the bunches to everyone, saying that the first person to receive them must not eat them until everyone else, including the very last person, has received a bunch.

God is so generous that he wants everyone to experience his love, however long or short they have had to wait; however long they have known about God; or however far away from God they have gone.

As everyone enjoys the grapes together in silence, ask them to think about and pray for those people they know who may consider that they are 'last' (perhaps because of unemployment, loneliness, illness or some other great sadness). Finish by saying together:

Thank you, Jesus, that with God the last can always come first.