

They were some hard words at the end of our Psalm this morning. God is angry with the people in the wilderness for their hard hearts and anxious complaining. No matter what they had seen of God's good creation and provision, they kept compulsively putting God to the test to see if God would meet their needs.

The psalm ends with God saying that the people "shall not enter my rest." It sounds like a punishment, but being unable to rest is also just a natural consequence of being unable to trust. If you don't trust that God is good, and if you fear there's no kindness in the universe, of course you'll feel compelled to keep striving, even to the point of bitterness and exhaustion.

Our default mode as human beings, it seems, is to forget the goodness and abundance of God and to become competitive and anxious – working to make sure that we're okay even if others aren't. This mode is exploitative. In our fixation to get more than we need, to accumulate and hoard, we take what has not been given to us, and what does not arise naturally from creation. We find new ways to extract more and more from the earth to feed our hunger, not only for food but for luxury items. We don't let the land rest, nor ourselves, nor others.

Out of this mindset we humans invented slavery – the idea that other people are resources to own and use to our own benefit, without seeing them as people with agency and dignity of their own.

When God took the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt, they spent years in the wilderness learning to practice God's law and to forge a liberated identity as the chosen ones of God. At the heart of this law was the sabbath. Sabbath is an invitation to remember that we are not God, and it is not *our* labour that turns the earth and makes the sun rise in the morning. The practice of sabbath rest trains us to look to the hand of God for what we need, and to see our lives and all we have as gift, not something we've earned.

We practice the sabbath as a reminder that we, like the Israelites in the wilderness, are not slaves. We should therefore not live as slaves to our desires and our anxieties, and neither should we enslave other people nor the earth. Rest is the opposite of slavery, because it is also the opposite of control or ownership. Rest reminds us to open our hands to give and receive, not close our fists to take, cling, or punch.

Those of us who live as children of God have to be constantly on our guard against the tendency to forget that all the good in our lives comes from God, and not our own efforts. Unfortunately, the compulsion to “use” the earth and other living beings, including humans, as resources, is always with us as a society and slavery keeps recurring and being re-created in new ways. We can end up participating in it without even knowing.

To step away from this mindset, we need the grace of the Holy Spirit and to remind ourselves regularly of God’s provision and the goodness of creation. The scriptures show us again and again how God gives, freely and graciously to all.

Today’s readings give us two examples of this.

The first, from Leviticus, demonstrates that Sabbath is for the land, not just people. Rest is part of God’s design for the whole of creation. It’s what the soil needs, what all plants and animals need. Our human cultivation of the earth has to be balanced with respect for its intrinsic qualities, including its intricate ecologies and biodiversity – we can’t just keep taking all the time, to satisfy our human wants. Rest lies at the heart of who God is and is part of the pattern of God’s making of the heavens and the earth.

Our second story is Jesus’ parable of the workers in the vineyard. Those who came later in the day and did less work received the same pay as those who laboured long through the heat of the day. How is that fair?

In the human world, our fear of scarcity and our greed wires us to find and keep success, even if that means creating or accepting unfair social structures that happen to suit us even while they keep others poor or struggling. When God’s generosity comes along and questions these systems we’ve created, it looks like unfairness, because maybe we’re no longer winning. Nothing’s been taken off us, but something’s been given, abundantly, to people we don’t think deserve it.

Part of the essence of Christianity is this phrase of Jesus’: “the last shall be first and the first shall be last.” Humanity has set up economic and social systems, without regard to God, where we think we know who the important people are, the winners and the losers. But in God’s economy, that hierarchy is upended.

I am always struck by the answer the 5 o'clock workers give to the landowner's question, "why are you standing here idle all day?" – "No-one has hired us."

To my mind, this response casts new light on the hiring of the morning labourers. Why were they hired first? Presumably they looked fitter and stronger and more work-ready than the others. They were chosen over the others. And they probably always were chosen, every day, enabling them to work and feed their families. They, rightly, felt that they deserved their wage.

But what of those who couldn't work, or who were perhaps injured, ill, small or weak?

The morning labourers who felt they should have received more than these late hired ones couldn't see that they were operating in an economy that gave them more, every single day, because of their gift of strength. A truly fair society builds in generosity towards those who can't participate the way things are – the way things have been set up to reward the few. A truly fair society looks into the face of all people and sees them as humans with worth and dignity and deserving of life's goods, regardless of whether they are "useful."

As we come up to the election, I invite us to ponder – what are we hearing from politicians that comes closest to reflecting God's generosity to those who are last, those who are weak, those who struggle to work and provide for themselves or their families? What are we hearing that reflects God's anger at the way we subject the earth to excessive cultivation and extraction, refusing to recognise the natural rhythms of God's gift of creation, and its need for rest and care? What party do you think is more likely to address exploitative labour practices and ensure that workers earn enough to be able to rest as they need?

God's invitation to us all is to participate in life-giving rhythms of work and rest. God's creation is good, abundant, and there is enough for all, if we learn to trust God's provision rather than constantly trying to take back control. For us as Christians living embedded in a world and an economy that basically can't see this requires discernment and the deliberate practice of sabbath rest. It requires us to reject greed, which so easily makes others and the earth into slaves to our wants. And it requires us to join with Jesus in turning over the tables of our society's injustice, finding ways to make the last first, even if that sometimes means letting ourselves be last.