

## Twenty-Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time

*The vineyard owner replied to the spokesman for the others: "Friend, I haven't been unfair. We agreed on the wage of a dollar, didn't we? So, take it and go. I decided to give to the one who came last the same as to you. Can't I do as I want with my own money? Are you going to get envious and stingy because I'm generous?"*

Matthew 20, 1-16

We know the details of this parable very well: When those who had worked through the heat of the day saw, from the end of the line, that the late-comers were getting the usual daily wage, they built up expectations of getting paid more. So, when they were paid exactly what they had agreed to, they began to grumble: "It's not fair!" And we might well be prepared to agree with them.

That prompts me to ask myself: "Do I become resentful when I see people around me treated with greater generosity than I think they deserve?"

Let's not forget that this story is a parable which offers yet another of Jesus' examples of what the kingdom of God is like.

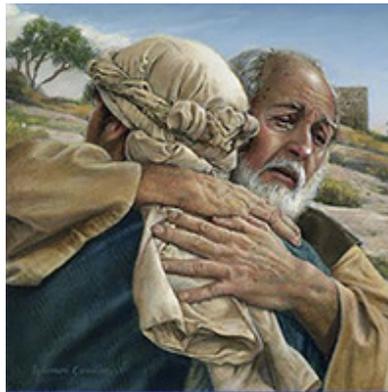
The director of the Darling Harbour Conference Centre in Sydney once joked, in his words of welcome to the participants of a Catholic Education Conference: "Darling Harbour is a lot like heaven; you'll see a lot of people there you don't expect to see."

Perhaps that's a bit like today's Gospel parable, which could be summarised in one sentence: "In the kingdom of heaven we'll meet a lot of people who haven't worked as long and hard as we have in supporting the Church, yet they'll still get the same reward." If I'm really honest with myself, I would probably feel like saying: "That's not fair!" That's because I have the same attitude as the all-day workers, and can't stomach the extraordinary generosity of the estate owner. Envy makes me want to grumble.

Logically, we can accept that the vineyard owner can run his business however he wishes, but we're still not comfortable with the directions he gives his foreman for paying the workers. In our heads, we argue that, if he is so generous, why doesn't he give a bonus to those who worked hard all through the heat of the day?

Clearly, the estate owner is meant to represent God. So, if we conclude that those who worked all day should have gotten more than the late-comers, we are effectively saying that God is not fair. Yet there are lots of stories in the Bible to illustrate that God detests social injustice and exploitation of the poor.

This parable is good news for all the late-comers who have been promised a just reward for their work. But it's challenging for those of us who look at everything we have as the result of all of our hard work and effort. We develop a sense of entitlement. Yet, all we are and have are gifts from God.



*God's love and forgiveness are distributed to each of us according to our needs and not on the basis of merit.*



- our talents, health, education, opportunity, possessions, intellectual property, wisdom and experience. Everything is gift. We just can't get that appreciation comfortably integrated into our heads and hearts. We can get so wrapped up in our own self-interest that we fail to truly see and appreciate what God has given us, gives us and will continue to give us through the goodness of other people and the unfolding circumstances of our lives. We fall into the trap of thinking that we have earned everything we are and have. Yet, we cannot earn anything from God. That's what's so amazing about grace: It's all gift - free, gratis and for nothing.

This is a story whose message has been repeated throughout the Scriptures: Jonah threw a tantrum, and fell into depression when God spared the people of Nineveh; the elder brother regarded his father as a dotting, old fool when he invited him to join in the celebration of his younger brother's return; the Pharisee at prayer thanked God that he was not like the sinful publican. God's graciousness is a great equaliser, which demolishes presumed privilege and puts all of us who receive that graciousness on a par.

Strangely, many of us seem to develop a level of resistance when it comes to receiving God's graciousness. We seem to want to feel the satisfaction of earning it. We resist grace, however, because grace has the effect of changing us, and change is something we often are reluctant to embrace, because it is painful. But, if we can get beyond our resistance, and set aside grumbling, we might one day discover that the best response to grace is gratitude.

Even a few minutes of reflection on the parables of Jesus, which we think we know so well, is enough to remind us that many of those parables catch us by surprise as they shatter our expectations and disturb our comfort. Yet, today's first reading from Isaiah prepares us for the shock of today's gospel parable as it presents God proclaiming: "I don't think the way you think. The way you work isn't the way I work. For as the sky soars high above earth, so the way I work surpasses the way you work, and the way I think is beyond the way you think" (Isaiah 55, 8-9). Still, I find myself siding with the all-day workers, wanting God to think and work the way I and they want God to think and work. Yet, at the heart of today's readings is that we're fooling ourselves if we think we can coax or manipulate God into fitting into the plans we make and the desires we want satisfied.

If there is another message clearly spelled out in today's gospel parable, it is that the vineyard owner is far more interested in the people who are in need of work to survive than he is in the harvesting to be done. After all, he goes out five times in search of labourers who need employment to survive, and he pays them the same wage, so that they can support those who depend on them. That challenges me to reflect on my views of the unemployed in my city, who turn up at employment offices late in the day or who line up at social security offices hoping for Government financial assistance. Do I see them as my brothers and sisters in need, or am I quick to label them as lazy, lacking in motivation or having no appetite for work? There is something about my culture that is quick to stigmatise the unemployed and those whose life circumstances have pushed them to the fringes of our society. Perhaps there's even something about my Church and parish that makes these unfortunate people feel less welcome, for no other reason than that have been forced to live from hand to mouth.

Today's readings disturb my comfort in ways they are surely meant to do. They push me to reflect on the way I think about justice, about my efforts to contain God, and my tendency to think I am entitled to this or that. It's one thing to ponder such matters, but what am I going to do about them?