

TWENTY-FIFTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Gospel: Matthew 20:1-16

Jesus said to his disciples: "For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. When he went out about nine o'clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; and he said to them, "You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right." So they went. When he went out again about noon and about three o'clock, he did the same. And about five o'clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, "Why are you standing here idle all day?" They said to him, "Because no one has hired us." He said to them, "You also go into the vineyard.'

When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, "Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first." When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage.

Now when the first came they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, saying, "These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat." But he replied to one of them, "Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?" So the last will be first, and the first will be last."

REFLECTION 1: GOD'S GENEROSITY

Today's Gospel parable (Matt 20:1-16) has been called the parable of the workers in the vineyard. The heart of the story is the amazing compassion and graciousness of the employer. Throughout the day this vineyard owner demonstrates sensitivity and compassion for the unemployed and that compassion is enlarged by his generosity at the end of the day.

A surprise surfaces at the heart of this parable, a steward suddenly walks on stage with a mandate to pay all the workers a living wage and to reverse the expected order of payment. At the time the living wage for a workman was one denarius a day and the master defends this grace filled decision to pay that sum in full to all the workers, regardless as to when they clocked in.

This story tells us something about God's kingdom and also tells us something about ourselves and the society in which we live. The laborers all received their due from the landlord who represents God, and yet there was dissent. However, no one was treated unfairly. The first workers agreed to the full wage of the day and they received it. Jesus is saying that everything is a generous gift from God and teaches us to be thankful for what we have been given.

Complaints are often directed towards God, 'Why are others healthy while I am in constant pain?' 'Why do others enjoy a more comfortable life-style than I do?' There are going to be times in our lives when someone else gets an unexpected blessing or receives some special recognition or clearly has a special talent. Jesus teaches us not to be envious as we are not in a race against each other. In God's eyes, the first and the last are brothers and sisters, who stand before God as friends and equals.

This week's texts from the prophet Isaiah and Matthew call on us to be more authentic reflections of the God whose ways and thoughts are so unlike our own. Even the wicked can turn to God and there find mercy and forgiveness. God says; 'Seek me, turn to me and be forgiven'. Would that Hitler and Stalin had given heed!

REFLECTION 2: THE COMPASSIONATE EMPLOYER

This week's texts, Isaiah and St. Matthew's Gospel, call us to be more authentic reflections of the God whose ways and thoughts are so unlike our own. God's ways and thoughts are such that even a scoundrel, even the wicked, can turn to God and there find mercy and generous forgiveness. God simply says: 'Seek me, turn to me and be forgiven'. We humans so often think in terms of merit rather than grace. Today's Gospel parable has been called the parable of the workers in the vineyard. The central focus of this story is the amazing compassion and graciousness of the employer. Throughout the day this vineyard owner demonstrates sensitivity and compassion for the unemployed. That deep compassion is enlarged by his generosity at the end of the day.

Three surprises surface at the heart of this parable. To the reader's shock, a steward suddenly walks on stage, the master opts to pay everyone a living wage, and finally the master deliberately reverses the natural and expected order of payment. At that time the living wage for a workman was one denarius a day, and the master defends his grace-filled decision to pay that sum in full to all the workers, regardless of when they checked in. In the parable, the vineyard owner oddly hires workers five different times in the course of one day and as the sun sets pays them all the same wage. In its Middle Eastern setting, as a minidrama, the parable is replete with questions, surprises and passion – but the end is missing. Do the complaining employees obey the master's command by taking their pay and leaving, or do they opt to continue shouting at him, demanding more? We are not told.

The owner of the vineyard needs extra workers. Either the vines need pruning or it is harvest time. So, he heads for a special corner of the village market where those without steady work assemble each day hoping for a job – any job, even for a day. He offers the going rate of one denarius a day. The workers accept his proposal and head off to do the best they can in the hope that by the end of the day, they will be hired for a second day or perhaps longer. Halfway through the morning the owner returns to the market and he finds other unemployed men who are standing, not sitting. They are alert and eager, still hopeful that they will be chosen by someone, anyone. However the master does not quote a payscale, but says 'What is just, I will pay you'. The men trust him and accept his terms. In fact the vineyard owner will spend the day returning every three hours to the market to hire new staff. Perhaps he is moved with compassion for the unemployed, offering words of encouragement. Each time the men are told that the master will be just with them as well; saving them from a return home to an anxious wife and hungry children and another day of frustration and disappointment. He refuses to humiliate them by handing out charity, but gives them what they desperately want – a job.

The big surprise comes at payday and has to do with the order of payment. Those who come last are paid first and receive a full day's wage. We now feel a sense of rising tension among the first group as they observe what is happening with the other four categories of workers. They suffer a series of shocks when they discover that they have received what was promised and no more. Their anxiety turns to anger, 'Equal pay for equal work', - a centuries old understanding of justice. But that is not the issue here, as the parable highlights the overpaid, not the underpaid. In fact no one is underpaid in this parable. Grace is not only amazing, it is also, for certain people, infuriating.

Justice is more than the equal application of law. In this parable justice extends to mercy and includes respect for the dignity of those in need and deep concern for their welfare. The parable offers an example of an employer who has compassion for the unemployed and shows amazing sensitivity to their physical needs and self-respect. A summary of the entire parable might be – ‘He comes to us where we live and he loves us as we are’. Once more Jesus creates a ‘house’ in which listeners/readers are invited to take residence as they make the worldview of the parable their own.