

Trinity XVI – 25th Sunday in OT

"For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts." The Gospel today offers yet another challenge to human ideas about Justice and makes us ponder about a deeper law at work in the Kingdom of God; – a law that emphasizes qualities such as mercy, compassion, and generosity above mere justice. Indeed it highlights the unlimited generosity of God and challenges Christians to develop these virtues and attitudes.

We have all developed a moral sense of justice, and a desire to see justice and fairness served in all aspects of life. A good Christian definition of justice is the firm and constant will to give God and neighbour their due. Justice is one of the four cardinal virtues with prudence, fortitude, and temperance. However, our parable this morning provides a classic illustration of the way Jesus used parables to break down people's conventional ideas. Still, today, despite the distance from its original cultural context, the shock and sense of injustice it can still produce in a listening audience is quite palpable.

According to the parable, the landowner goes off at daybreak (that is 6 a.m.) to hire workers for his vineyard – the labourer's day was from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m. – 12 hours. In the Greco-Roman world, casual labourers used to gather in the town square waiting for employers to hire them. As we heard last weekend, these early workers were promised their just daily wage of a denarius. Then at the third hour (that's 9 am) the owner goes out again to hire more labourers. Similarly, at the sixth hour (at noon), and the ninth hour (at 3 pm) the landowner hires more labourers who are standing idle in the marketplace since no one has hired them. The master promises them a fair wage. Then finally at the eleventh hour (that's at 5 pm) the landowner goes out again to hire more labourers and

promises them a fair wage. All the labourers hired from 9 am onwards would have expected to receive less than a denarius since they have not done a full day's work. Yet, to the pleasant surprise of these latecomers and to the very unpleasant surprise of the early starters the landowner pays all of them the same amount – a denarius. Why should those who have worked only an hour be paid the same as those who have slaved in the hot sun all day over 12 hours? Isn't that unfair and unjust?

The landowner argues he is not unjust, since he had an agreement with all labourers to pay a just wage, and he is honouring that agreement. However, no sensible worldly employer would proceed in this way, they would pay each labourer a just wage according to the hours they had worked.

Furthermore, the vineyard owner provokes the early starters with his instructions to pay the last comers first and the first comers last! Not only does he pay everyone the same wage but he pays the latecomers first! One must imagine the queue, with the newly arrived workers at the head and those tired from a full day's labour watching as the late-comers are paid in full. In many ways, the audience is drawn into sharing their disappointment and indignation. If those employed early had been at the head of the queue, they would have gone off happy with their contracted wage. The problem arises only when they see the latecomers reaping the same reward. We can all be tempted to grumble at other people's fortune and feel self-pity comparing ourselves to other's successes – material or spiritual. If we do grumble, we are not perfect in love – love is the willing of the good of the other – which requires a lot of mercy, compassion, and generosity – as we know if we approach any relationship with only a sense of justice, that will not go anywhere too far. Justice needs to be tampered with mercy, compassion, and generosity.

The historical context for this parable is the problem that arose in Matthew's community and the early church. Those Jewish Christians who have risked all and believed from the beginning are now seeing the Gentiles, the newcomers entering the Kingdom and experiencing the forgiveness and grace of God, without all the hard work of the covenant and the Law of Moses. They are offered salvation and redemption as much as the Jewish people, who struggled to stay faithful to the covenant for centuries. The Jewish people were the ones, of course, who worked from the morning hours. The Gentiles were the latecomers. Their grumble is humanly understandable, but the Lord is teaching them that God's mercy, compassion, and generosity invite all people to the fullness of life. What is important in the parable is not how long they have worked but that they answered the call when it came. The vineyard in Hebrew Scriptures always referred to Israel, the people of God, while the 'master' was God. This parable would have been clearly understood as being about the experience of being gathered into God's people and about who was welcomed into the kingdom, highlighting the unbounded generosity of God. We are very vulnerable to a reward-centred understanding of our relationship with God. We can project the notions of human relationships to our relationship with God. We tend to forget that all is grace and gift, even the opportunity to serve God and worship him.

We are further through this parable that people are called to Christ at different times in their lives. Some are baptized in the 'morning' as babies, who have always believed and worked in the Lord's vineyard. These are the 6 a.m. starters. Others experience a call from the Lord in their teenage years, the 'mid-morning' group in the 3rd hour, yet others as young adults at the 6th hour, some are called in their middle ages, in the 9th hour and again some at the eleventh hour, in the evening of their lives, as senior citizens. It's the Lord's mysterious

call that we all hear at various times of our lives to come to his vineyard and to serve him.

The Lord continues to call each person to his vineyard, we are reminded of the heart of the good Shepperd that goes after the lost soul, the struggling sheep.

The Lord doesn't compare us with each other. Each of us has a unique combination of talents, challenges, and opportunities in life. The mix of burdens and graces we experience are never identical to anyone else's – Each of us not only has a story of our life that is our own but also a story of our soul that is our own. What the Lord asks of us is that we follow him the best we can and not compare ourselves with how the person next to us answers the call.

The unexpected tasks in life that we are called to undertake, the losses we must sustain, the sorrows we must endure, the confusions and frustrations we must submit to, are puzzles to us... and life itself is an impenetrable paradox, and will remain like that to the end, unless read with the key given to us by Jesus in the Gospel... Christ tells us that the seed must die to live, that the foolish are wise and wise foolish, and the last shall be the first and first last; so many of Jesus's parables turn human logic on its head... this is the Good news we must understand if we are to reach joy and happiness. Even though we live very different lives here on Earth our rewards will be the same in the Kingdom of Heaven.

Lastly, the theological reality of grace is emphasized in this parable. As we know, we are not saved and invited to the kingdom of God because of our years of service in the Lord's vineyard, nor because of our years of worship and good works. We are saved when we put our faith in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who died and rose again; as a gratuitous gift.

This is why the repentant thief who put his trust in Jesus as he died, can inherit paradise on the same day without any earthly service, together with someone like John the Baptist who lived an entire righteous life until death. As St. Paul says in Galatians 6:14 – May it never be that I would boast, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.

As Shakespeare noted in *The Merchant of Venice*:

Though justice is thy plea, consider this – That in the course of justice, none of us should see salvation; we do pray for mercy, and that same prayer doth teach us all to render the deeds of mercy.

Let us ask God our Father to help us grow in the deeper law of heaven – justice tampered with abundant mercy, compassion, and deep generosity.