

Homily for Trinity XV 2020 - Work and Wages in the Kingdom of God

Today's gospel, usually called the parable of the labourers in the vineyard, like all the parables of the kingdom told by our Lord, is well grounded in the everyday experience of life in Israel at the time of Our Lord's earthly ministry. People who were looking for casual work would indeed stand in the market place and hope that someone would come along to hire them. The job would be discussed and the rate of pay agreed and an informal contract would be agreed. A full days work was 12 hours from dawn to dusk (6.00am to 6.00pm). A payment of one denarius was the usual day's pay too. The Master of the Vineyard offered a fair day's pay for a fair day's work and those who started work in the vineyard in the morning were obviously satisfied with it. It would be roughly the equivalent of \$50 in today's money. Not a lot by any means but enough to get by on.

When the grapes were ripe in September, getting them picked and crushed before the arrival of the Autumn rains was an urgent necessity. Rain and warm, humid weather would ruin the crop. So it was quite usual for as many hands as could be found to be hired in order to speed up the job. Hence the hiring of people for less than a full day was also quite usual. (The people who were hired at 9.00am, midday, 3.00pm and 5.00pm)

The problem arose at the end of the day when those who had come to work later also received one denarius - very generous pay indeed for only an hour's work!

The people who had worked all day were aggrieved – and if we are honest with ourselves, we would all be of the opinion that those workers who worked for a shorter time should have received less. It seems patently unfair that they should get the same as people who had done a full twelve hour day's hard work. In an age of arbitration, contract labour and industrial awards this parable seems to make little sense as it destroys the fundamental principle of 'a fair days work for a fair days pay.'

The whole crux of the parable, though, is the response given by the Master of the Vineyard to those who grumbled about this seeming injustice, by reminding them that he was paying them what he had agreed. We should listen again to his words... *'Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree*

with me for one denarius? Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?'

Isaiah gives us the key to understanding this parable in the first lesson today when he records the Lord God as saying... *'My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are my ways your ways.'*

What seems to be just is deliberately turned upside down by Jesus, because the apparently unjust action of the Master of the Vineyard is meant to shock us into a deeper awareness of the breadth of God's goodness and to effect a change in our attitudes.

Do not lose sight of the fact that this story is a parable and it is intended to tell us something about the reign of God. God is not bound by the quid pro quo rules of recompense. God's gifts are spontaneous, overflowing and unmerited. God's generosity is something incomprehensible and nobody has any claim on it. No one has any rights over it. God's generosity is called Grace - which is an unmerited gift of love. It is because of God's grace, his free gift if you like, we have life and being bestowed upon us in the first place. As well, it is because of God's grace alone that we have salvation in Jesus Christ by placing our faith and trust in his saving passion, death and resurrection.

I'm mindful of my Grandfather's advice from many years ago that one useful way of reading and understanding the scriptures is to make yourself one of the characters in the narrative or the story and then apply the words to yourself. It's obvious that the vineyard is the kingdom, that the Master is God, so that leaves the workers for us to identify with. Are you a cradle Christian - one who has always believed and practised your faith? You're a 6.00am worker. Are you one who has been a Christian for most of your life? You are a 9.00am worker or maybe a midday worker. Or are you a recent convert? You are a 3.00pm worker. Do you know anyone who came to repentance and salvation right at the end of their life, as I certainly do, and died full of faith and deeply grateful to Jesus Christ for the hope of eternal life? They are the 5.00pm workers.

Wherever we fit into the parable, this story tells us with crystal clarity that the reward that awaits all of us is... exactly the same. It is the ultimate

reward because God offers us eternal life and asks us to serve Him in this world until the day when we are with Him for ever. Of a certainty, there is no reward that can possibly be greater than the gift of everlasting life and friendship with God. The problem is that all of us can so easily be tempted to think that - if we work harder at this than anyone else - or serve God for longer - then somehow, this gives us greater credit in God's eyes.

Its easy to expect a special place of honour and respect if we have been around for a very long time.

Its just as easy to find ourselves resenting a new member of a congregation who is full of enthusiasm and who wants to implement all sorts of plans.

It is very easy to feel resentful at the idea that someone having a death-bed conversion after a life of self-indulgence might receive the same reward as us. At one level, it just doesn't seem fair!

Remember this, dear people: Not one of us can ever earn eternal life - however hard we work - it is purely a gift of God. This is the great lesson of the parable of the vineyard. Work we must, if we can and work we must as long as we can, but all that God gives is of grace. We cannot earn what God gives us; we cannot deserve it; because what God gives is given out of the goodness of his heart; what God gives is not pay, but a gift; not a reward, but a grace.

Thankfully, God is never outdone in generosity - and, since as faithful believers we know full well that we are recipients of that generosity ourselves, let us always endeavour to rejoice that others are able to receive it too - and let us learn too, to make God's generosity the model for our own lives.