

47 Twenty-fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time Year A September 24, 2017
Isaiah 55:6-9 Psalm 145 Philippians 1:20-24,27 Matthew 20:1-16

The parable in Matthew's Gospel today is a challenge for all of us. Our first instinct of social injustice would tend to be outrage. Seen through the filter of the world, its concerns and rules of fairness, it's so easy for us to side with the labourers in this parable who thought that, since they had worked more hours, they should be paid more. They toiled for nearly twelve hours in the heat and sun for one denarius, which was the value of a full day's work back in those days.

Yet, those who only work for one or two hours toward the end of the day receive the same wage. Is that fair? What is important in the parable though is not how *long they worked* but that they answered the call when it came. All the men called to work in the vineyard are equals; they all had hungry mouths to feed. The landowner has mercy on all of them, giving them what they needed, not what they earned.

There are two puzzling questions in today's parable. First is the question of fairness and the second is, "Who are the eleventh-hour people?" On the question of fairness, it is natural to think about the unfairness of the first workers receiving the same wage as the last workers. *But what we fail to consider is that Jesus is really telling a parable about the Kingdom of God. Fairness is not the issue in the story.* None of us *deserves* anything from God; none of us could ever cause God to be in debt to us.

Everything we have, even life itself, is a free gift graciously bestowed on us. In serving God, we receive back much more that we could ever give to God. Working in the vineyard of God's Kingdom should not be seen as a burden but rather as a great privilege! If we have responded early in our life to God's call, we are not unfortunate or ill-used; we are favoured. If we have responded late, we are favoured too! Early responders to God's call, or late responders to His call, we are all favoured equally by God.

We notice that the owner in the parable did not compare one group of workers with another one. The same is true for us. The parable teaches us not to compare ourselves with others or to be envious of others. The most horrible part of envy is that it is a negative reaction to some goodness. This is what happens in today's parable. The envy of the first workers draws a negative reaction from the goodness of God to the

other group. The parable then is making the point that God is generous and merciful. His generosity is extended to *everybody*.

God keeps searching out every man, woman and child who will respond to His invitation to work in His vineyard. He especially searches out those who are abandoned, those who are sinners, and those who are lost and lonely and without a shepherd to guide them. To each one who says 'yes' to God, He will give all of Himself as a gift.

God's gifts are absolutely *free* for the giving, not bound by rules or by the age of reason, or by labour laws or protests about how He is expected to parcel out His gifts to the many who love and seek Him. Because God is able to, He gives freely to all people without cost. As it is written in the First Reading, Isaiah writes: "My thoughts are not your thoughts, my ways are not your ways, says God."

Now let us look at the second question of who are the eleventh-hour people who the owner called to work. The eleventh-hour people were the Israelite people who were considered the sinners, the poor, the tax collectors, the prostitutes. It was not that they did not *want* to work, it was that no one wanted *them*. These people were considered to be the lowest of the lowest in the Jewish society and therefore, were outcasts.

Yet Jesus feels a deep compassion for these unwanted people. Generosity from God in accepting even sinners equalizes everything. For their part, many of the chosen Jews resented what was happening and envied the good fortune of these late arrivals.

Further, Matthew's Gospel was written approximately in the year 80 A.D. At that time, there was an explosion of Gentile people joining the new Church that Christ had established. Many of the Jews were uncomfortable with the acceptance of taking the eleventh-hour arrival of the Gentiles into the Church on an equal basis because their own race had already borne the heat of the day over long centuries of service and suffering. The parable is making the point that God is generous and open to welcoming *everyone* into His Kingdom.

We can also apply this parable to ourselves. Unfortunately, this attitude towards the salvation of sinners is not confined to the Jewish people only. Today there are people who would regard themselves as devout Catholics who will make comments about eleventh-hour people and deathbed conversions, comments which are anything

but charitable. They cannot accept that, after struggling all their lives in the service of God, giving time to prayer, Mass and the Sacraments, they end up the same as those who don't bother with religion and turn to God only at the end of their life.

Such an attitude betrays a complete lack of understanding of Christ's mission on earth, which is to bring salvation to all people. As Catholics, we are called to rejoice whenever anyone comes to know our Lord, whether early in their lives or late. More importantly, Jesus is seeking the sinners and the lost so we must not be an obstacle to these people but reach out in compassion to help them attain the Kingdom of God. Jesus teaches that the people who are lowest in the world's view will be the highest in the Kingdom of Heaven.

Today's parable should give us new hope and courage. It may be the sixth or the ninth or even the eleventh hour of our life but we can still work in God's vineyard if we respond to His call. We should not look at how the person next to us answers the call and what time. What is important is how you yourself answer God's call. It is not too late to work for God, because He cares and loves everyone *equally* from the first to the very last.

The main point of the parable teaches that God deals with us in ways that are very different from the ways we normally deal with one another. The goodness of God is a great comfort to us. But it can also be a great challenge for us, because we are called to imitate God's generosity with one another in the same way that God deals with us.

The parable of the Kingdom of Heaven teaches us that eternal salvation is a *free gift* for all God's children. God treats *all* His children with equal generosity, grace, love and mercy. For this we can be truly thankful.