

Sunday Homily

25TH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

20 SEPTEMBER 2020

YEAR A

DIVINE OFFICE WEEK I

“You go to my vineyard too and I will give you a fair wage.”

Illustration

A March 2007 report on workers who cleaned streets and collected rubbish in a city in northern England found that those directly employed by the city council received a decent wage, sick pay, and had job security. Others, who were employed on a day-to-day basis, earned between £2 and £2.50 an hour less than their directly employed counterparts – and for the same work.

Some of these people were asked to turn up at between five and six in the morning to find out whether they would have work for the day. In another city in the same region, casual labourers were brought in from Poland by distribution centres for big retailers, to work alongside permanent staff. Recruited through agencies, they were typically doing the same work for £2 an hour less.

The discrepancies in pay led to tensions between local workers and the new arrivals. All were desperate for an income and there was little bargaining power over wages. It is no wonder, then, that feelings often ran high between employers and their workers and between the employees themselves.

Gospel Teaching

In first-century Palestine, too, casual labour was at the mercy of rich employers and landowners. Plenty of them were unscrupulous, paying as little as possible for a day's work. However, the landowner in today's parable is a decent man. He goes out again and again searching for those who are unemployed, understanding their hardships, for unemployment is not only an economic problem but also a spiritual problem that demoralises people.

The labourers who have done “a heavy day's work in all the heat” complain because others have received the same wages for working only one hour. It seems to be so unfair, particularly when the last in are paid first. Yet one denarius is a just wage for a day's work and that is what they had agreed upon. The employer has been moved with compassion for the unemployed people he found in the marketplace. Out of genuine concern for them and their families he pays them a wage that is not proportionate to the work done but proportionate to their needs.

But the employer's actions do not go down well with everyone. The parable focuses on two attitudes – jealousy and generosity. Jealousy is shown by the first workers in the vineyard. However understandable their sense of grievance,

their feelings of injustice do not take into account the needs of the workers who came later in the day to feed themselves and their families. Their envy of the good fortune of others is disappointing, and contrasts with the generosity of the landowner. His actions are intended to demonstrate God's compassion and munificence towards all.

In the kingdom of God there are surprises. Those who worked the whole day got a full day's wage, but those who worked only for one hour also received a full day's wage. This is the righteousness of the kingdom.

Application

Jesus tells the story about the vineyard labourers in order to teach us something about God's kingdom. It also teaches us something about ourselves and the society we live in. Can we recognise ourselves in this parable, where the attitudes of jealousy and generosity are contrasted? Would we be complaining like the labourers employed in the morning, or deeply grateful like the labourers employed towards the end of the day? Would we appreciate a generous employer, even if others seem to be reaping more benefit?

In the society in which we live, those who have a good start in life, those who are influential and well educated, get more. Those who are strong often exploit those who are weak. This is the righteousness of the world. In the perspective of the kingdom, those who are powerful and influential will not get more. God's arithmetic is different. We are being told that the kingdom of heaven is about God's abundance and God's indiscriminate generosity.

Experiencing God's benevolence transforms who we are and the way we see our lives. We can recognise the blessings given to us. We can take joy in our homes, our daily bread, our schools, our jobs, the people who care for us, and even the blessings in the challenges we face. Too often we complain: "I should be earning more than him"; "Why are other people more gifted than me?"; "Why are others healthy, while I have a chronic illness?" In fact, everything is a gift from God. We are called to be thankful for what we have, and not complain about what we have not been given.