

24-09-17 – Proper 20 – Year A
Matt. 20.1 – 16

If we were faced with the scenario given to us in today's gospel reading, the parable of someone who has worked a whole day in the blazing Palestinian sun being paid exactly the same as someone else who had only worked for the last hour of the day, it probably isn't hard to imagine our reaction: we would get upset, protest about it, call the employer all sorts of names – at the very least. If it were to happen in today's workplace with our raft of employment legislation, unions to go and complain to, there would probably be a major protest, perhaps even a riot. The boss couldn't get away with saying to his protesting workers, as the landowner did: I am doing you wrong; did you not agree to work for the usual wage for the day.

OLJ told the parable told the Labourers in the Vineyard to produce this very response – indignation, protest and complaint! Sometimes just isn't fair – and perhaps the gospel message isn't fair either. It is scandalous, insulting and outrageous. And why so? Because in the gospels, and never more so than in this reading, we encounter the lavish, free, generous and wanton giving of God's grace to all men and women. If we haven't experienced something of the scandal of grace, then we haven't begun to understand the 'gospel of grace' which is at the heart of OLJC's message and teaching.

Jesus caused quite a stir, not just in this incident (which is only a story, a parable, and not an account of something which actually happened) but by his association with so-called public sinners: tax collectors, prostitutes, and others on the margins of society. The Pharisees were indignant and horrified because they reasoned that God loves the righteous and despises the unrighteous.

However, OLJC revealed time and again that God's love shines on all, on the unrighteous quite as much as on the righteous – and the precise reason he was sent to this earth was to save the sinner, the poor, the outcast, those who felt themselves far from God, those who would never set foot in a synagogue – or even a church. Where sin, darkness, evil, death abound, it is precisely there where God's love and mercy, God's grace and forgiveness abound.

So in this parable of the labourers in the vineyard OLJC is simply choosing a picture from daily life, to illustrate dramatically to his hearers (us) a challenging religious truth: that no one ever deserves God's love. God's invitation is offered to all without strings, and his acceptance of those who respond, This approach is completely alien to the whole idea, so common, of deserving or meriting a reward, an idea that encourages the attitude that serving the Lord is a laborious chore which needs to be recompensed by God. On the contrary, what is central to the Good News, the Gospel of OLJC, is that it is an incredible gift and should be a joy to receive – well expressed in the hymn attributed to one of the early Jesuit missionaries in the 16th C, St Francis Xavier: My God, I love thee...

Then why, O blessed Jesus Christ,
Should I not love thee well?
Not for the sake of winning heaven,
Nor of escaping hell;

Not from the hope of gaining aught,
Nor seeking a reward;
But as thyself hast loved me,
O ever loving Lord!