

25th Sunday (A)

- Whenever this Gospel is discussed, the room usually tightens.
- We recognise the complaint of the workers hired at dawn because it sounds like our own: we carried the burden of the day, so why should those who arrived at the last hour receive the same wage?
- We instinctively sympathise with the workers who were hired early in the morning; they worked all day in the heat, yet when pay time came, those who had worked for only an hour received exactly the same wage.
- It doesn't seem fair, but before we decide that the landowner is unjust, the parable asks a more unsettling question: what kind of fairness are we defending?
- When I was teaching moral theology & ethics at ACU, one of the most difficult concepts for students to grasp was that of justice; they understood what is called *commutative justice*: the principle that each person receives what is exactly due to them - full pay for full work, half pay for half work.
- What they found more difficult was *social or distributive justice*: the recognition that justice is not simply about giving everyone exactly the same according to their contribution, but about ensuring that people's legitimate needs are met, especially the needs of the vulnerable & excluded - that is the deeper justice at work in today's Gospel.
- The landowner is not paying according to hours worked; he is ensuring that every household can eat that night - the workers hired late were not necessarily idle by choice; they may have been the old, the frail, the unknown or the unwanted, the people repeatedly passed over.
- Their dignity and their families' hunger did not disappear simply because no one chose them earlier.
- This is particularly significant on this Social Services Sunday.
- People experiencing poverty, disadvantage, marginalisation or insecurity do not cease to be human beings with dignity & legitimate needs because of their circumstance, or because they have less to offer economically to our society, so the Gospel challenges us to ask not simply, "*What have they contributed?*" but also, "*What do they need?*"
- Of course, just wages & proper employment conditions matter.
- Unions have rightly fought for contracts & wages that protect workers from exploitation, but we can unconsciously transfer this contractual understanding of justice into our relationship with God.
- Isaiah reminds us: "*My thoughts are not your thoughts, my ways are not your ways.*" Yet we continually try to make God conform to our calculations.
- We imagine that God must reward the people who have worked hardest, prayed longest, behaved best & been most faithful.
- We can even imagine heaven as a kind of divine payroll office where God calculates exactly what everyone has earned.

- The first workers are not cheated; they receive exactly the wage they agreed to. What angers them is not injustice done to them, but generosity shown to someone else. The landowner's question "*Are you envious because I am generous?*"—reveals the deeper wound: grace becomes offensive when we think another person's blessing diminishes our own.
- Life in the Kingdom is not a wage we earn; it is a gift we receive.
- This does not excuse unjust wages or exploitation in human society.
- It means that before God none of us can turn faithfulness into a claim of superiority, because every one of us lives by grace - God's grace is not *quid pro quo*; it cannot be demanded as our just due, claimed as compensation, or earned by the quantity or quality of our religious performance.
- Grace flows from God's own goodness & generosity.
- And Scripture tells us that this generosity is extravagant: God gives to the first & the last, the greatest & the least, the strongest & the weakest, the saint & the sinner, & this is the extraordinary thing about God.
- Sometimes we speak about whether we believe in God, but perhaps the more important question is: What kind of God do we believe in?
- There is an enormous difference between believing in a God who, as Jesus tells us elsewhere, makes the sun rise on the evil & the good, & believing in a God who keeps score, calculates our failures & rewards our successes.
- To discover God as unconditional love can be profoundly liberating, but a threatening, judgmental God can become a destructive burden, & sadly, that is a god many people have rejected. And perhaps rightly so.
- The challenge is not to make God smaller so that God fits comfortably into our sense of fairness. We must let God be God.
- And we see the face of this God most clearly in Jesus; the God Jesus reveals is scandalously generous, forgiving & compassionate, so it is hardly surprising that Jesus provoked such hostility; his proclamation of a God whose mercy could not be controlled or rationed was deeply threatening to those who wanted God to conform to their religious calculations.
- The parable therefore challenges not only how we understand God, but how we treat one another. Do we ask, "*What does this person deserve?*", or do we ask, "*What does this person need?*"
- Do we calculate another person's worth according to their contribution, status, history or usefulness? Or do we recognise, as God does, a human being whose dignity is never earned & never lost?
- That is the justice of the Kingdom: justice enlarged by compassion, transformed by mercy & made generous by love; so today, especially as we remember the disadvantaged & marginalised in our society, may we allow the Gospel to expose the smallness of our calculations.
- May we discover again the extravagant generosity of God, & learn to practise a justice that comes not from a narrow sense of what people deserve, but from a heart large enough to love as God loves.