

25th Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)
(Isaiah 55:6-9 / Matthew 20:1-16)
21.09.2014

Dear brothers and sisters,

Having just heard the parable of the labourers sent to the vineyard, I don't know how you feel about it, but I must confess that each time I hear this parable, I feel a little uncomfortable. The fact that the landowner paid those who worked the last hour the same wage as those who worked all day, doing "a heavy day's work", or a major part of the day "in all the heat", does not sound fair to me. And of course, it is not fair. But this parable is not about fairness; it is about God's generosity.

If we were in business, we simply could not follow this parable's lead. If we did, believe me, we would be bankrupt very soon! If we are seeking to reflect upon justice between human beings it is important not to take this parable literally as a model of action, because the parable is not about human justice.

This parable is neither about business or human justice, it is about divine justice. This parable is not about fairness, but about God's generosity.

God's generosity transcends human behaviour. The key to the parable is in its last three words: "I am generous". It is the generosity and goodness of the landowner that explains his apparently capricious conduct. At first sight, it does seem unfair that all the workers were to receive the same wage. But when we understand the motive of the landowner, we judge his conduct very differently. A denarius represented a day's wage, just enough to support a family. Anything less, and especially payment for a single hour, would be inadequate. It is because he has pity on them, that he pays them all a full wage. There is nothing arbitrary in his conduct. It is the action of a man who is full of compassion for the poor. This is God's way of acting, for God is all goodness and mercy.

This parable is also about how all human beings are equal in God's eyes and in God's heart. It is about how the love of God is offered equally to all people. God's love for us is not earned by the amount of good works we do. We are saved by grace and not by our works, even our good works. We are all equal in God.

It is so difficult for us human beings to understand God's way. As human beings, we have favourites. There are people we like and people we don't like. There are people we love to meet and people we try to avoid. That is how we are as human beings.

God is so different to us, and this is difficult for us to grasp this difference. God has time and energy, love, forgiveness and salvation for everyone equally. God does not try to avoid anyone. God loves all unconditionally and loves each one equally.

This parable is about the heart of the gospel, which is mercy. What is essential in the gospel is God's mercy. In God, mercy is victorious over justice. Mercy is God's justice!

We are called by Jesus “to be merciful as our heavenly Father is merciful”. We are also called to be compassionate for the poor and needy. We too are called to recognize God’s image in every human being. We too are called to respect, serve and love all human beings without exception. We are called to give food to those who are hungry and give drink to those who are thirsty; to clothe those who are naked, and to practice hospitality. We are all called to be close to those who are sick, imprisoned, abandoned or dying alone.

It is difficult for us to understand God’s attitude toward the workman of the eleventh hour. There is no other explanation than God’s mercy. To quote Pope Francis: “Mercy overcomes every wall, every barrier. It is mercy that changes the heart and life, that can regenerate a person and allow them to insert themselves in a new way in society”. We all know people of the eleventh hour. It is often for us difficult to accept them. Somewhere we are envious. But the truth is that God is generous and merciful. We should not be envious but grateful, grateful for the unconditional love of God not only for us but for all human beings without exception.