

THE PARABLE OF THE LABORERS IN THE VINEYARD



Matthew 20.10 "Now when the first (of the laborers in the vineyard) came, they thought they would receive more (than the last of the workers); but each of them also received (only) a (denarius), the usual daily wage. And on receiving it they grumbled at the landowner, saying, 'These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us, (to us) who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.'"

Now one of the complaints from small children that all parents have suffered at one time or another, is the one that goes something like: "But Daddy, that's not fair. It's just not fair!" Hardly a day went by at my house when my children were

younger than I did not hear that frustrated lament and that cry of inequality. Humanity seems to mysteriously harbor some innate sense of justice, a deep-seated feeling that life should be fair. And Children have a way of voicing this belief quite simply, and early. Adults are usually more indirect in making our complaint, but we make it none the less, for we too decry the advantages of others and the inequality of life. We are all of us keen to observe when we are not treated fairly, and we are usually quick to protest.

The interesting thing, however, is that we usually only complain when we get the short end of the stick. It is the child who gets less than his fair share that cries out, not the one who gets more, but who has suffered injustice as well. The individual who receives more when hard pressed can usually come up with a good reason why he or she has gotten more than the others. "I'm older, Dad," or "I got here first," or "she got more last time." Thus, it is not so much an innate sense of justice that we harbor, but an innate sense of injustice. We are quick to complain only when we are the disadvantaged. It is the poor who wail and lament, not the rich. It is the destitute who cries out for justice, not the wealthy. It is all of us who bellow that life should be fair, when we feel that ours is not.

That's why today's Gospel is one of my personal favorites, for there are some many different levels to this story. For

instance, the parable accurately describes a common scene in the ancient world, the kind of thing that frequently happened in the marketplace of any Jewish village or town in ancient Palestine at harvest time. The grape harvest, for example, ripened towards the end of September, and then shortly thereafter the rainy season begins. So that if the harvest was not gathered in before the rains began, then whatever remained on the vine could be ruined. Consequently, to get the harvest in there was often a frantic race against time, and any worker's help was welcomed, even if he could give only an hour to the labor. In ancient Galilee the marketplace was also the equivalent of the labor exchange. Those are migrant workers in today's Gospel lesson standing there in the marketplace late in the day looking for work. And the fact that some of them remained there until five o'clock in the evening is proof of how desperately they wanted to work. And it was not unusual for a landowner to hire people throughout the day during the harvest time.

The context of this story is also important. Just before the telling of this parable in Matthew's Gospel, the rich young man came up to Jesus and asked, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" And Jesus told him to go sell all that he had and give it to the poor. But the young man went away sorrowful for he had great possessions. Jesus then went on to explain to the crowd how difficult it is for a rich man to enter kingdom of

God. Peter said in reply, "Look, Lord, we have left everything and followed you. What then shall we have? What will be our reward?" Today's parable is the way Jesus answered Peter, the way he explained to them all about the nature of God's grace and generosity.

There is also something very familiar and recognizable in the parable. A denarius was the equivalent of a day's labor, the usual daily wage. It was more than generous of the owner to pay those who worked all day, a denarius, as agreed. But there is also something very real about the laborers' complaints in today's Gospel. We are not surprised by their grumbling; we are not surprised by their complaints. We are surprised, however, by the landowner's generosity. For it does seem blatantly unfair that the landowner paid those who worked all day in the scorching heat the same wage that he paid those who worked only a half day, or even just an hour. It's not fair, and we probably sympathize more with the workers than with the generous landowner. We expect the landowner to be fair, don't we? But the landowner replies 'I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?' What is Jesus trying to tell us here, that God does not reward us as we expect him to?

That God is so much more than generous here, treating all the laborers the same?

As I told my children every time that I heard the lament that "Life isn't fair," I would say something like, "And who told you that it would be?" As my children grew older, I would explain that we mustn't expect that life will be fair, or they shall be sorely disappointed and grieved in our lives. For we will then be in danger of not appreciating the good things we do have, because we will always be envious of those who have even more; and we will not be able to persevere through the difficult times we will face, because we will always be jealous of those who seem to suffer less than we do. Life isn't fair, and that is a sad truth that we must all learn to accept. We don't all start in the same place, and we don't all begin with the same advantages. Life isn't fair.

But I also told my children that God isn't fair either, and we mustn't expect God to be so. In fact, we don't really want God to be so, do we? We don't really want to receive the true rewards of our actions, the wages of our sin, the real consequences of our persistent failings and broken promises and human foibles. For in the end, it is God's mercy and generosity, his forgiveness, and his understanding, that we want, and not a fair judgment and real justice. For we are not worthy of God's love and concern for us. We do not deserve his attention and

affection. Scripture says, "What is man that thou art mindful of him, the Son of man that thou dost care for him?" For the true wonder and the mystery of God's grace, Jesus reminds us, is that God does bestow his bountiful love upon us nonetheless, that while we are yet sinners Jesus died for us, that God loves and accepts us as we are, unconditionally, equally. I think that the real point of Jesus' parable is to acknowledge that life isn't fair, and that none of us deserves what we get in life. And God isn't fair either, but thanks be to God for that. AMEN