

THE SIXTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

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Thank you, Father, for making yourself known to us through your word. We ask you to encourage us in our faith, so that we may be ready to serve you; for the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Sometimes a good sermon is one that gets under people's skins and unsettles them. Sometimes we preachers even want this, which is why it can be disappointing in its own way some weeks to have people at the church door say "I really enjoyed that sermon!" And what I would like to say in reply is "I was hoping it would upset you!"

In today's gospel reading, Jesus is trying to upset us a little. This story is meant to offend us, especially our sense of what is right and fair. At first glance, it would seem that this parable is about unfair working conditions. In the twenty-first century, Jesus would be hauled before the Fair Work Commission, but actually, Jesus is not talking about unfair working conditions, he is trying to make an important point about the Kingdom of God.

The parable is divided into two parts. The first part deals with hiring laborers, and the second part with paying them. Like many parables of Jesus, the storyline is based on the everyday life of a Palestinian peasant in the first-century. It comes as part of a larger group of stories and parables that drive home the idea that "the first shall be last."

Time and time again Jesus tries to get the message through to the disciples that the world's way of seeing a person's worth must not be their way. The parable he uses to illustrate this is about a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. The usual daily wage he paid the labourers was a denarius. A denarius would have been just enough to buy food for that day. Which means that the landowner doesn't really pay his workers very well. One denarius was the first-century equivalent of the minimum wage. This is hardly enough money for a worker to feed himself and his family, if he has one. They would literally be surviving hand-to-mouth, day-by-day. No work that day meant no food that day. The parable is thus not an illustration of God's generosity.

The next aspect of the parable that is somewhat puzzling is that it is clear that the landowner doesn't hire enough workers at the beginning of the day. This means he has underestimated how many workers he would need to pick the grapes, or he is cheap, and trying to save money by picking just enough workers to get the job done, while minimising his wages bill. It becomes clear though that he will need to hire more workers as the day goes on. Note too that throughout the day, he still doesn't hire enough people. He is not a very good manager of his vineyard.

And so throughout the day the landowner keeps hiring more and more labourers to ensure that the harvest is completed. For the first labourers, the landowner agrees to pay the 'usual daily wage'. For subsequent labourers, he agrees to pay them 'what is right', while not actually specifying what 'right' would be.

Problems occur when the landowner gives those who started last what he had promised to those who started first. The other part of the problem occurs because he paid the last first. If he had paid the usual daily wage first to those who started work first, they would have gone home none the wiser. Instead, he ends up having the early workers think that they will receive more than those who were hired later. He seems to want to show all the workers that those who started after them are getting exactly the same as they are.

Of course, if the parable had put the payment of the workers in reverse order, there would really be no point to it. The point of the parable is that the landowner kept his word to all the labourers, no matter when they arrived. The landowner agreed to pay the worker hired first one denarius, and that is what they received. And he told those who worked later in the day that they would receive what was right. Which they did because it was the landowner's right to determine what was right, not the labourers. The owner claims the right to pay his workers not on the basis of their relative accomplishments but on the basis of his own choice. And his choice was that a denarius for each of them was "right".

This parable is a challenge to our modern understandings of workers rights and employer's obligations. But there are no doubt some similarities with how we deal with each other in aspects of our daily living, and of course in the Church.

It has been suggested that the community that Matthew wrote his Gospel for were having issues between the established Jewish congregation and the newer Gentile converts to the Christian faith. It seems as though there was some tension between those who had been faithful Jews all their lives until they became part of the early Christian community and the 'Johnny-come-lately' Gentiles who were becoming part of a new and larger community. The older members of the congregation were obviously getting the recognition they felt they deserved.

I have been in congregations where longer-term congregation members have had difficulty with new people moving into 'their' church community. Longer-term members of congregations have had difficulty when new people who have gone onto rosters, started sitting on Parish Council or taken up other leadership positions in the parish, or have seemed to take up more of the Parish Priest's time that was usually reserved for them.

These tensions will be normal in all communities or groups which are undergoing change. What we in the Church need to remember is that this should actually be a cause for rejoicing and not a threat to our place in the kingdom.

There is always more room to expand the circle of those who have come to faith and who wish to express that life within the Christian community. The grace and generosity of God are boundless, and we should rejoice that this is so, and hope that more and more people will come to join us and share in God's goodness, which is offered to all.