

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Today in our Gospel, we hear Jesus tell a parable that tends to upend our idea of fairness. This parable is part of Jesus' response to Peter's question: "See, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?" This challenging part of the reply is framed with a formula concerning the 'first' and the 'last', which is inverted at the end of the parable.

Since we are dealing with "the kingdom of heaven", we need to think our way into the cultural setting of the parable, eradicating worldly presuppositions along the way.

First of all, the employer went to the marketplace to hire daily labourers. This was the usual custom at the time. If you wanted some new workers, you went to the market. The most motivated workers would show up before dawn – canny employers would often go before sunup to snag those motivated workers before someone else could get them. Straight away in this parable, we are made aware that it is God who comes seeking us, rather than vice versa: but it helps if we situate ourselves in the place where we know God will most likely reveal Himself. If we don't spend time in the market, how can we be present with the Lord?

Secondly, the employer came with the express intention of hiring labourers. Now sometimes today the word "work" seems to be a dirty word like "landlord" or "taxman". But work has been a part of human existence from the beginning of recorded history. And here we see the dignity of work and God's grace in providing said work, just as he did in Genesis in the garden – God gave Adam and Eve jobs in the garden as the caretakers of creation. Man was made for work – it's only sin that makes us slothful workers.

Thirdly, as we might expect, the employer contracted with his employees to pay a specific amount. After all, nobody expects to work for free, and the employer doesn't want to risk being bankrupted by greedy employees. So, they worked out a price for the day's labour. That amount, a denarius, was a typical Roman soldier's daily pay. For a typical uneducated labourer, this was good pay indeed. In Palestine in the time of Jesus, you could survive on 70 denarii per year and with 150 you'd be very well off. So, the employer was being quite generous with the amount. Furthermore, both parties agreed to the amount.

So far so good: but as the parable proceeds it becomes a little strange to our ears. There is nothing wrong with the employer seeking out other workers as the day proceeds: even if it is for no other reason than to rescue them from the indignity of being idle. And each would receive, "whatever is right"

I don't know whether it was normal for the last to be paid first, but certainly this is what Jesus has the employer doing here. Remember, we are talking about the kingdom of heaven: which though the world views it as topsy-turvy, is in fact setting things the right way up!

Imagine the surprise when the employer gave to each group of labourers the full day's wage! A pleasant surprise for some, but a source of increasing alarm to the first-contracted workers. Jesus certainly wasn't teaching a lesson about the economy and diplomacy of trade relations!

The angry attitude of the first-in-the-field reminds us of the jealousy of the Prodigal son's brother. Both Peter and Paul teach us, 'how true it is that God does not show favoritism'. God is unchanging. This means He still does not show favoritism. In our churches and communities, there are eleventh-hour converts, and they are just as eligible as recipients of God's grace as those who fancy that they have personally "borne the burden and the heat of the day" because they were "born" into the faith.

So now the workers who started at 6AM make their unhappiness known. The complaint was: "you have made them equal with us". However, since the first-comers received their full contracted and fair wage, why was anyone complaining? Would they rather that these others were sent home without sufficient for their daily meal? The Lord is in no doubt: "I will give unto this last, even as unto you... Is your eye evil because I am good?". God is good indeed, and we should never look down on those who came to the faith in later hours than us.

We pray day by day in the Lord's prayer, 'Give us (plural) this day our (plural) daily bread'. Whether viewed in relation to our physical needs, or to our spiritual needs, it is a prayer for us all. We all need daily bread, and we all need the spiritual sustenance that only comes from the Holy Spirit. We pray this for all people, not just ourselves. We should not begrudge those who receive the answer to this prayer, no matter how late in the day they arrived. We must not envy the new converts their blessings. May God continue to bring people into His fold through the working of the Holy Spirit. Amen.