

Sunday 24<sup>th</sup> September 2017: SIXTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST. YR A.

Gospel: Matthew 20:1-16

**The parable of the generous vineyard owner: “Are you envious because I am generous? Thus, the last will be first, and the first will be last.”**

A man died and went to heaven. St. Peter met him at the pearly gates and asked to examine his qualifications. “We have a point system,” St. Peter said, “and only those with enough points can enter.”

“Points?” the man asked, “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

St. Peter explained, “It’s simple. We determine how many points you have by the life you’ve led. We require a hundred points to get in. Tell me about your life, and I’ll add up your points.”

The man thought for a moment and said, “Well, let’s see. I was a faithful member of my church for over forty-seven years. I served as a deacon and an elder, and I taught Sunday School.”

St. Peter said, “Very good. You get one point.”

The man said to himself, “Oh, my! Well, let’s see, I was a good husband and a good father. I gave a tithe to the church, and I contributed to all sorts of charities. I helped with various civic projects, and I served on several committees. Doesn’t that count for anything?”

St. Peter said, “Indeed it does. You get another point.”

The man’s face sank, and he said, “I can see now, I’ll never make it. The only way I’d ever get into this place is by the grace of God.”

St. Peter smiled and said, “And that, my friend, is worth ninety-eight points. Welcome!”

**In the Name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit Amen.**

Be honest. When you heard the reading of the Parable of the Labourers in the Vineyard just now, did your heart leap for joy?

Were you thrilled when you heard that the workers who'd toiled and slaved all day long in the hot sun were going to get the same day's wages as those who'd worked only one hour? I think not!

Let's face it, this is not one of Jesus' more popular parables. It's the parable most everyone loves to hate. And for good reason!

The parable runs against the grain of one of our most deeply cherished values, the value of hard work and just reward: The more you work and the more productive you are, the more you ought to get paid. I don't know many who would disagree with that. And this is the complaint of those who worked all day: "You have made them equal to us."

The parable provokes one of the most primitive cries of childhood, when one sibling gets a better shake than another, the one who feels cheated screams: "But that's not fair!" And so, it goes: Some seem to get more than they deserve while others get less. It's just not right.

The parable of the generous vineyard owner (which appears only in Matthew's Gospel) is the first of several parables and exhortations challenging the Pharisees and scribes and those who criticised Jesus for preaching to tax collectors and sinners.

Jesus makes two points in this parable:

First, the parable speaks of the primacy of compassion and mercy in the kingdom of God. The employer (God) responds to those who have worked all day that he has been just in paying them the agreed-upon wage; they have no grievance if he chooses to be generous to others. God's goodness and mercy transcends the narrow and limited laws and logic of human justice; it is not the amount of service given but the attitude of love and generosity behind that service.

The parable also illustrates the universality of the new Church. The contracted workers, Israel, will be joined by the new "migrant workers," the Gentiles, who will share equally in the joy of the kingdom of God.

Today's Gospel strikes at our tendency to judge everything and everyone in terms of how it affects **me**. How someone else benefits or is lifted up doesn't matter — **my** hurt feelings trump their joy. Christ calls us to embrace the vision of the generous vineyard owner: to rejoice in the good fortune of others and their being enabled to realise their dreams, instead of lamenting our own losses and slights.

We have our scales, yardsticks, actuary tables and market indices to measure what is just and what is not; but God is generous, loving and forgiving with an extravagance that sometimes offends our sense of justice and fair play.

In the parable, God's justice is that everyone got to work, and everyone was given the essential earnings to feed his family. The inequity of their varying hours of work was offset by the inequity of their varying strengths and abilities. And this is God's justice, not that we get what we deserve, but that we get what we need.

In God's kingdom, we will all find work that meets our needs. The parable is also a challenge to those who have a hand in shaping the structures of work today. And so, I ask; 'Can Christians do anything to advance this aspect of God's kingdom right now?'

Christ calls us to look beyond labels like "tax collector" and "prostitute" and seek out and lift up the holiness and goodness that resides in every person who is, like each one of us, a child of God. The parable of the generous vineyard owner invites us to embrace the vision of God that enables us to welcome everyone to the work of the harvest, to rejoice in God's blessings to all, to help one another reap the bounty of God's vineyard.

Amen.