

When you work for God, expect surprises!

Life often seems unfair to us, but in the economy of God's justice, the sheet is always balanced.

*He said to one of them in reply,
My friend, I am not cheating you.
Did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage?
Take what is yours and go.
What if I wish to give this last one the same as you?
—Matthew 20:13-14*

In parts of the United States, it isn't uncommon to see groups of men and women standing in groups in the parking lots of hardware and home improvement stores like Home Depot and Lowes. I never gave them much thought until a friend explained who they were: these were day labourers who were hoping that a contractor or someone needing help with a home repair project would hire them for the day or, at the least, for a few hours.

These people are continuing a tradition that is found in nearly every culture and, as we see in this Sunday's Gospel, was certainly common in Jesus' day.

In a recent conversation with a member of my Salvatorian community who had worked in Arizona and as a missionary in rural parishes and mission stations in Mexico, he shared with me that he often had opportunities to talk with these labourers. One man shared with him how heartbreaking it was to return home at the end of the day, without having been hired, to face his family with no means to buy food or pay bills. It's a mode of existence that many in our country will never know, but is the way of life for many, despite its hardships and uncertainties.

With this perspective in mind, we can understand why the decision of the landowner in Jesus' parable is so generous. He's giving every labourer he hired the opportunity to provide for themselves and their families. After all, when we look at the text and consider why the labourers weren't working, the answer is there: "Because no one hired us." We might fall into the trap of imagining they were simply being lazy, but if there is no work to be had, what option did they have but to wait?

Despite the hope this parable offers as we consider what it tells us about God's generosity and providence; many people are offended by the unfairness of the story. Even the most faithful Christians among us can chafe at the idea of living a life of committed discipleship while still receiving the same reward as someone who comes to God at the "end of the day." After

all, how many of us are sceptical at the idea of a deathbed conversion or of a condemned person “finding faith” before they are executed? And yet, when we respond in this way, aren’t we adopting the same attitude we often condemn in the “good brother” at the end of the Parable of the Prodigal Son: “Look, all these years I served you and not once did I disobey your order; yet you never gave me even a young goat to feast on with my friends. But when your son returns who swallowed up your property with prostitutes, for him you slaughter the fattened calf.”

But when we read this text alongside this Sunday’s First Reading (Isaiah 55:6-9), we see that where we human beings get stuck on the question of what is fair and what isn’t, this parable is ultimately concerned with God’s justice. Pope Saint John Paul II summarized the meaning of this parable when he said, “The parable portrays *the unlimited generosity of God*, who is concerned about providing for the needs of all people. It is the landowner’s compassion for the poor — in this case, the unemployed — that compels him to pay all the workers a wage that is calculated not only according to the laws of the marketplace, but according to the real needs of each one.”

In the end, this parable isn’t about wages or fair labour practice, although it does invite us to reflect on how our society treats the unemployed, the underemployed, and migrant workers. This Sunday, Jesus is offering a lesson in God’s abundant love and mercy, and even the landowner’s search for more and more labourers, regardless of the late hour, speaks to us of the way God continues to seek out and invite more and more “labourers” for his vineyard. Salvation is expansive and inclusive and is always available, regardless of the hour of the day.

When have you had negative feelings because of the good fortune of another person? What was the cause of those feelings?

How does this parable invite us to reflect on questions of income equality, just wages, and access to work today?

How does your labour in God’s vineyard benefit others? How does their labour benefit you?

Words of Wisdom: “The parable summons us to believe that God’s justice played out in this world is not limited by human conceptions of strict mathematical judgment, by which reward is in proportion to effort or merit. Mercy and goodness challenge us, as they did the workers in the parable, to move beyond justice even though they do not exist at the expense of justice. God’s ways are not human ways.” —John Donahue, S.