

## Homily for The Twenty Fifth Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year A) (20/09/2020)

Hearing the parable it might be interesting to ask ourselves ‘Who works the hardest in this story?’ In a sense it is all about who works the hardest. The vineyard workers who have worked longer hours get very put out about the ones who have barely worked at all. So, who really did work the hardest? Well at first sight you might say the people who went to the vineyard at Dawn and worked there all day, but is that really so? What about the landowner? We know that he has a bailiff to work for him, but this man is hardly used at all. The owner is out in the market place at Dawn looking for workers; then a few hours later he stops what he is doing and goes to the market place hiring again; then three hours later he does the same; and three hours after that he does the same; and then two hours later he does the same; and then an hour or two after that, as if the five hiring trips to the marketplace were not enough, he goes out again to oversee the payment of the workers. This landowner is far from being one of the idle rich; he works longer hours than any of the others, pouring his energy and enthusiasm into seeing that his vineyard is cared for, but also into seeing that the men who need work get the chance to work.

The landowner wants his vineyard cared for; he also wants to give the labourers work; but he has another purpose, too, he wants to make them think and reflect a little. If he had begun paying the first workers first, they would have received their day’s wages with satisfaction and gone on their way without knowing how the later workers would be paid. But the landowner reverses the order so that the men who have been at work all day will see what happens to the remainder. How they react to that will be very interesting indeed.

The reaction is a bit disappointing, but perhaps not surprising. They want to be paid more than they had agreed to, because the people who have worked much shorter hours have been so well paid. The landowner could have got away with paying the latecomers less, but he chooses not to. While he freely gives away what is his, the grumbling workers grasp at what is not theirs. Their grumbling and murmuring exposes an unpleasant stream in human behaviour, the idea that we cannot all be winners, and as we are all in competition I must therefore do everything I can to make sure that I am one of the winners. They feel they have lost because others have received the same pay for shorter hours. But isn’t the truth that everyone in the story is a winner: all the workers get work, so they will not starve; no-one was hard done by, no-one was underpaid, the workers who began at daybreak received a fair day’s wages for a full day’s work. No-one will go to bed hungry that night.

The idea that we are all in competition with one another, and that your happiness and success must somehow diminish my own is one of the weeds sown into the wheatfield of the world by the evil one. It is false, but we so easily believe it. Looking back to the beginning of the parable, the landowner agreed a wage with the first group of workers. I am no linguist, but I know that the Greek word used for agreement is ‘symphony’ – the landowners symphonies with the

workers, their different and separate voices sound together in harmony. Then all through the day landowners and workers work together to see that the vineyard is cared for. It all breaks down when the voices stop speaking in harmony, and turn to discord instead. This story is meant to make Jesus' hearers stop and think. It is of vital importance because this all happens towards the end of Jesus' life, just before Palm Sunday, so it is essential that his followers are well prepared for what is going to happen. The evil one always assaults us by trying to turn symphony into discord.

On the eve of Palm Sunday, when his greatest challenge awaits, Jesus is making his followers think, and think hard. Do not allow yourselves to be set against one another. Do not believe the lie that you are competitors striving to win in a battle for the limited store of happiness the world has to offer. Do not become pawns in a struggle for supremacy, a war of every person for themselves, a struggle to come out on top. This can only lead to misery and disaster.