

The Catholic Parish of Petworth & Midhurst West Sussex

Fr Peter's Homily for The Twenty Fifth Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year A) 24th September 2023

Today's parable is not really a story about work, that is just the peg on which the story is hung. Like all parables it is meant to shock us into realising something about ourselves, learning some lesson about who we are. Because, like all the parables, it is very familiar there is a danger that it loses its power to shock; and in addition, because its origin are in a culture very different from our own, we have to put a little work in if we are to allow it to speak to our hearts.

The original workers, hired at daybreak, start out happy enough. They could have stood on in the marketplace, unwanted and unpaid, all day long, but instead they are offered a fair day's pay for a fair day's work, and they have nothing to complain of. They will be able to put food on their children's table for another day.

On four more occasions the landowner goes into the market place, and finds people waiting for work. For whatever reason – sickness, idleness, a day's work elsewhere cut short for some reason, they appear throughout the day. It is only the landowner's persistence that brings them any hope, because if he had stayed at home they would have spent the rest of the day in fruitless inactivity. But the landowner is a hard worker himself and so he draws together these little groups of the unemployed and forms them into a single workforce, at least for today.

What happens at the end of the day is not very edifying. The men who worked for an hour are paid the same as those who worked for half a day, or a whole day. Everyone will eat tonight, everyone will be able to put food on the table. You might think that this was good news indeed: no hungry children today. But the men who have worked all day do not see it like that. They are angry because they have been paid the same (a fair wage for a day's work) as the one's who barely broke a sweat. If we are completely honest, we probably feel some sympathy for them. We cannot help comparing ourselves with other people and feeling hard done by. They have more than us, they did less work than us, their lives are better than ours, and so on. It is a part of our sinful human nature to make comparisons like this. Sin puts barriers between people, separates them, creates a false narrative of isolation and individualism. For those early starting workers, the key thing is that they feel hard done by because they were paid the same as people who only worked an hour. They form a group, those earliest starters – they speak of 'we' and 'us' – but it is a group that defines itself by erecting a strong barrier that keeps everyone else out -we worked all day, they (the people outside, the ones we don't like) only worked for an hour or so.'

For the landowner the key thing is that everyone's family gets to eat that night. That is the shocking fact that this story seeks to awaken in us. In our obsession with comparing ourselves to others, and scrabbling to get to the top of the pile, we lose sight of simple humanity. Fighting to see how we are different, in ways which are really pretty trivial, we lose sight of the very substantial ways in which we are all the same. 'Take what is yours and go' the landowner says to the men who have worked all day: that is, you just worry about your lives, don't compare them to other peoples.

The people who had worked all day, and who had fairly been given a day's wage, as agreed, see the world with a very short horizon: in fact, they see no further than their own wants. That is natural enough, we all tend to default to that, but the parable is meant to wake us up and make us see that our human divisions are, for the most part, pretty artificial. The 'in' groups and the 'out' groups are entirely arbitrary, and whatever the distinctions that we make up may be, they are completely invisible to God. He only sees the image of his Son, and he sees that just the same in everyone.

We struggle with this. We struggle to see other people as our brothers, our sisters. We struggle to rejoice at the good fortune of others, especially if it seems to come at a cost to ourselves. It seems the human instinct to compete, even if the cost to the losers is great. But God's thoughts are not our thoughts, his ways are not our ways: 'the heavens are as high above the earth as my ways are above your ways, my thoughts above your thoughts' he says. It is good for us to be challenged by this, disturbed by it. The early workers see success as doing better than everyone else – getting the full day's work and, hopefully, getting the most money. The landowner just finds his pleasure in everyone eating that night. It is an uncomfortable read.