Thinking faith
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'Getting the Point' 3:

The Parable of the Living Wage?

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What can we learn about God from the parable of the Labourers in the Vineyard? Fr Jack Mahoney continues his 'Getting the Point' series by discussing how Jesus' parables used familiar, everyday situations to illustrate truths about God, and suggests how the behaviour of the employer in this parable might prompt us to think about our idea of justice.


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The parables of Jesus provide a continual fascination for Christians, as well as many a puzzle, and the parable that we know as that of the Labourers in the Vineyard is no exception. It occurs only in St Matthew's Gospel (20:1-16) and tells the story of an employer taking on casual labour to work in his vineyard. Beginning in the early morning he goes into the market place to recruit workers and agrees with them the usual wage for the day. He returns at midday to take on more workers and agrees to pay them, then does the same again in the early afternoon, late afternoon and even right up to the evening, 'the eleventh hour.' Then at the end of the day he gets together all those who have been taken on at different times during the day and pays them all exactly the same wage. Those who have borne the famous 'heat and burden of the day' are resentful and complain that others who turned up later are getting paid the same wage for less work. However, the employer points out that the early workers have been paid exactly as they agreed – so where is the wrong? Why should they be so envious if he decides to be generous to the latecomers? Isn't it his money? And that, Jesus says, is what God is like!

What is the point of the parable? Some people have interpreted it as Jesus teaching his fellow Jews that the Gentiles who are only now being called into the kingdom of God should not be resented, and that they are, and should be, made just as welcome as the Jews who have worshipped and served God for centuries. It reminds one of another parable, that of the Prodigal Son, whose elder brother (also assumed to represent the Jews) was angry at the generous reception given to his penitent brother when he contrasted this with all he had done for his father without any special reward (Lk 15:25-32). (I sometimes wonder mischievously what Peter and the other apostles really thought of Paul, this pushy newcomer from Asia Minor, who had arrived in the Lord's vineyard so late, born out of turn, as he himself admitted [1 Cor 15:8]; we know they fought among themselves about their own status [Mk 9:33-35]). However we apply it, the basic message of the parable is that God is equally welcoming to all who respond to his invitation, whenever they decide to do so, and that no one should object to God's generosity to others or make jealous comparisons with their own situation. Think of the 'penitent thief', the convicted criminal crucified with Jesus (Lk 23:42-3), whom he welcomed to join him in paradise at the last minute.

Yet many people have a sneaking sympathy for the workers who had been toiling away in the broiling sun since dawn and who felt they were being treated unfairly in not being rewarded more than those who came on the scene later, or even at the final hour. It was not that the later arrivals were lazy or free riders: as they explained, 'no one has hired us.' (Mt 20:7). Yet surely those who had been labouring all day deserved

more, or had earned more in return as a matter of justice? The answer has to be yes, if we understand justice in terms of recognition of merits or deserts. The philosopher John Rawls described justice in terms of fairness, an idea that appeals to many people, and he tried to identify justice with whatever would create the fairest conditions for everyone in society. It doesn't seem fair, as in the parable, not to reward people in proportion to their efforts and their labour, or to distribute payments to people without taking into account the differences between their performances. Aristotle would subscribe to the view that basic justice means treating unequals unequally, not levelling them all out in the same Procrustean way. Certainly, labour negotiators today would take issue with any different arrangement or argument.

One thing we have to realise often about the parables Jesus tells is that he is not necessarily approving of the behaviour of the lead character in the story, far less adopting the political, economic or social policy which the central figure may be shown to be putting into practice. Jesus might identify God with the father of the prodigal son (the parable is really more about God as a 'prodigal', almost indulgent father); however, the ruler who tortured his unforgiving servant (Mt 18:34), or the landowner who punished his disloyal subjects (Mk 12:1-12), or the king who punished his ungracious wedding invitees (Mt 22:1-14) are not being held up for our imitation! Even the behaviour of a shepherd who abandons his flock on the hillside in order to look for a sheep that has got itself lost (Mt 18:10-14) may be considered verging on recklessness, although Jesus' comparison of God with such a shepherd shows vividly to what lengths God is prepared to go to save individuals. Nor is Jesus in his parables necessarily supporting or approving of the political, economic or social conditions of his environment, such as the banking system (Mt 25:27), or the labour market (Mt 20: 1-2), or the institution of slavery (Mt 18:23); although today sociologists probe the details and social presuppositions of the parables to learn more about Israelite society.

Another thing to bear in mind is that in his parables, Jesus regularly uses the ordinary conditions of Jewish life to make a simple comparison. We can easily be fascinated by the often-colourful details of a parable and look for special significance in such details, turning a simple comparison into a complex allegory. In fact, from its earliest days the Christian community seemed prone to this tendency, apparently trying to draw every nuance possible from the few precious words we have from Jesus, as we can see in the parable of the sower and the detailed explanation offered of it, perhaps by the early community (Mk 4:1-9, 13-20). The simple message of the sower parable is that God is incredibly generous with his love, scattering it throughout the world to good effect. However, we often follow the early Church in analysing all those circumstances mentioned where sowing the seed goes wrong, forgetting that the parable is basically the story of ultimate success, not failure, in God's generous enterprise.

A famous allegory was the one worked out by Fathers of the Church based on all of the details of the parable of the Good Samaritan who came to the help of the Jew who had been mugged on the road to Jericho (Lk 10:30-37). The allegory saw Jesus himself as the Samaritan outsider coming to the help of Adam, who had been enticed away from his true home and had been assaulted by the devil's temptations and left robbed and 'half alive' by the roadside, deprived of God's gifts of nature and supernature. Jesus redeems him, or picks him up from his fallen state, dresses his wounds with the sacraments and conveys him into the Church to recover, paying the innkeeper – St Peter, naturally – to look after him with the two coins of the great commandments of love of God and of neighbour. By contrast, Jesus' own point seems to have been simply to illustrate the commandment to love one's neighbour by defining your 'neighbour' as whoever needs you (Lk 10:29).

So, in the parable of the labourers in the vineyard Jesus simply is choosing a startling secular parallel to illustrate dramatically to his hearers a challenging religious truth: that no one ever deserves God's love. God's invitation is offered to all without strings and his acceptance of those who respond, whenever they decide to do so, is totally unmerited by their behaviour. This approach is totally alien to the whole idea of deserving or meriting a reward, an idea that encourages the attitude that serving the Lord is a laborious chore which needs to be recompensed. On the contrary, what is central to the Good News is that it is an incredible gift and should be a joy to receive, as the hymn often ascribed to St Francis Xavier expresses well:

Then why, most loving Jesus Christ,
should I not love thee well,
not for the sake of winning heaven,
nor any fear of hell;

not with the hope of gaining aught,
nor seeking a reward;
but as thyself hast loved me,
O ever loving Lord!

Nevertheless, a parable, like any passage in the Gospel, can prompt reflection and lead to valuable insights which one might well recognise are not contained in the original. Such insights may still be used in us by the Spirit as we prayerfully consider or study the text, which, after all, we believe is the word of God. In that sense, it is possible to offer the further thought that the parable of the labourers in the vineyard can, after all, tell us something about justice – but not justice as deserts or reward. There is, I am prompted to point out as a moral theologian, another view of justice, one which is not based on deserts like the one we have been examining, but which is based on need; and this different approach to justice might well throw further light on the behaviour of the employer in the parable of the labourers. All the men in the market place were looking for employment, being in the most insecure social position of daily casual labourers, totally dependent on the law of supply and demand. Yet, they had basic needs which had to be satisfied and they had to make a regular living through their work in order to meet their own needs and possibly those of their families. This recognition of human needs being met through labour was the approach taken by Pope Leo XIII at the end of the nineteenth century, when he pointed out in the midst of the *laissez-faire* industrial revolution the way in which workers were being disregarded and victimised by being underpaid. As he wrote in the first Catholic social encyclical, *Rerum novarum*: 'if one man hires out to another his strength or skill, he does so for the purpose of receiving in return what is necessary for the satisfaction of his needs.' (n. 5)

In the parable of the labourers in the vineyard, we are informed that the wage agreed on with the early morning workers was one *denarius* (Mt 20:2), which is generally recognised as having been a daily living wage for the time. Accordingly, when the landowner at the end of the day paid a *denarius* to all his workers, regardless of how much of the day each had spent in his service, we can think of him as not being simply a generous, or overgenerous, employer, but in fact as being a just employer, in the sense of being one who recognised the need that all his workers had for this amount of payment for their and their dependents' daily sustenance, regardless of the hour at which they joined his work force.

Given the contrast between justice understood as recognising deserts, and justice understood as meeting people's needs regardless of what they deserve, we must conclude that the latter is much more consonant with the gospel, both with regard to God's attitude to us – as is the point of this parable – and also with regard to our desirable attitude to one another. Our whole attitude to God should not be one of claiming a proper reward for our efforts, as the disgruntled all day labourers muttered, but one of holding out our needs to God, confident of his continual concern for each one of us as individuals.

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