

25TH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

LITURGY AND LIFE

The focus of the parable of the Good Employer is generosity. Here again we see that parables use every day events to convey a message. The life of a day labourer in the ancient world was difficult by any estimation. Unemployment was a continual problem, and many slaves had an easier life because their owners had a financial investment that required protection and adequate care. Day labourers involved no such investment and could be hired for short periods that would demand overwork. The workday was about twelve hours – from sunrise to sunset, and the complaints of those first hired that they have borne the burden and heat of the day are pointers to the difficulty of the work in the Palestinian sun.

The poverty of day labourers was so obvious that the Torah required that they be paid each day at sunset because they needed the money to survive (Lev 19:13; Deut 24:14-15). A denarius was usually considered the average daily wage for a day labourer. It was subsistence pay at best. Usual estimates are that an adult in ancient Palestine needed about half a denarius a day to live and that an income of 200 denarii per year marked the poverty line. Still, 200 denarii per year would hardly do more than keep a small family from going under. As always, though, not everyone was poor. The rich “fared sumptuously,” and the disparity between the rich and the poor was great and offensive, as it still is. The parable is intended to exclude arrogance, ideas of superiority over others in the kingdom. The parable focuses on the goodness of the owner and the complaint, the envy, of those who thought they should get more for their work. The parable instructs us that God’s treatment of people, his judgement, is not based on human reckoning and human standards of justice.

The principle of equal pay for equal work is a virtual presupposition of our sense of justice. Those who worked less should be paid less, but the owner gives all the same wage because without it those hired later would not have enough to live on. Humans, then and now, are continually comparing themselves with others, trying to assess fairness and level of

accomplishment, which is exactly what the disciples were doing. The only fact that causes the first hired workers to complain is the comparison of their wage with that of those hired later. As with most humans, justice is in their eyes that which gives no one else – not even the poor – an advantage; it is defined from a self-centred perspective. To the complaint of injustice the owner defends his actions as just because he paid those hired first the agreed amount and because he can do as he wishes with his own property. For most of us injustice is what happens to our disadvantage, while what happens to our advantage is good luck.

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Who is a good person? One day a monk met a man who told him how good a person he was: he donates part of his riches to the poor, he defends people in court, twice a week he visits the sick. The monk listened to him and said, “You are, indeed, a good person. But now you go and ask:

your wife, what she thinks about you
your children, how they would like you to be
your relatives, what they expect of you
your neighbours, what stories they tell about you among others
your fellow workers, what they say about you.
After you’ve done all that, come and tell me how good you are!”

– Dr Augustine Kanachikuzhy, ssp