

25th Sunday in O.T. 2020

In the fairy tale, “Snow White and the seven dwarfs”, the wicked Queen asked her magic mirror, “Mirror, mirror on the wall, who is the fairest of them all?” All was well as long as the mirror responded, “Thou, O Queen, art the fairest of them all”. However, one day that the mirror responded, “You, my Queen, are fair, it is true, but Snow White is even fairer than you”. On that day, jealousy and resentment and revenge gripped the Queen's heart.

There is a sense in which we too look into, not the mirror on the wall, but that mirror we call life, and we ask, “What do others think of me? What am I worth in their eyes?”

All is well as long as we are reassured, “Since others think well of you and hold you in such high regard, you are the fairest.” But how things can change when we feel hard done by and believe that we are not as highly regarded as we think we deserve to be. Then we become discontented and find ourselves making comparisons with others. Recall that theme of jealousy in the fairy tale. Isn't it true that few of us are immune to bouts of jealousy? How easy it is to become a grumbler! We may think that others do not have to work as hard as we do; that they have fewer problems to contend with; that they get things so easy while life is so unfair to us! Negativity and bitterness can seize our hearts.

It is to alert us to this danger of self-pity and resentment that Jesus tells the story of the workers in the vineyard. The core of the story is that some of the men had worked all day long “*in the heat*” and they grumble that, “*The men who came last and have done only one hour,*” have been treated “*the same as us.*” We may, perhaps, feel they were justified in their complaint; if we do, we are missing the point that Jesus is making. So, let us look more closely at the Gospel narrative.

The situation is this: the men are seasonal workers. Each morning they gather in the marketplace and landowners come to hire those they need for that day – it is what used to be called a “hiring fair”. The basic living wage was one denarius a day. It was important that these men found work for they had families depending on them. If there was no work the family went hungry!

The landowner in Jesus' story is unusually generous. First, he does the expected thing, he goes out at six in the morning and hires his workers for the day. Then he goes out at nine o'clock and hires more men; he does the same at noon and again at three o'clock in the afternoon. So, for some the working day is twelve hours, for some nine hours, for some six hours, and for some three hours, but he makes the same agreement with them all with regard to their hire – he pays one denarius.

For those hired first and working the whole twelve hours this was unusual enough, but it is what the landowner does next that really “gets to” them. He goes out at five o'clock, with only one hour of the working day left, sees more men standing round and hires them for one denarius. Now the probable reason they have been standing around all day is that they are unemployable, they are useless workers, left behind when the workforce has been picked over. Nobody wanted them, yet these hopeless cases get a day's pay too – a day's wage for an hour's work.

Jesus wishes us to realise that this landowner is motivated not by the quality of the work but by the needs of the workers, and that alone explains his generosity. He knows that without a day's wage, families go hungry. But those who have worked the full day grumble because they have been treated equally. They ask the wrong question, “How much does he give?” Jesus would have us ask, “Why does he give?” Here we can begin to glimpse why Pope Francis insists that “the name of God is mercy”.

There are important lessons for us in this Gospel passage. First, Jesus intends us to see in the landowner the figure of his Father who is generous to all – God freely gives of his gifts and of his love. Then, just as the workers could not set the landowner's agenda, neither can we set God's agenda. Next, we must be careful in forever comparing our lot with that of others. Finally, obsession with “rights”, envy and jealousy, tear the heart out of us, and deny us a generous and free spirit.

*May your kindness, O Lord, be upon us
who have placed all our hope in you.
To us who dare to hope for everything,
give, O Lord, all your love.
And if our hearts are too small*

*to receive your abundant generosity,
let your merciful hand, we pray,
open them to your love. **Amen.***