

25th Sunday Year A: Good News for the Poor in the Lord's Vineyard

The laws of the market are largely determined by supply and demand; price is ultimately decided by scarcity. On the other hand, as we hear in the parable this morning, the laws of the kingdom of heaven are based not on scarcity but on abundance- God's justice and goodness are open and generous and especially mindful of bringing those in who have been left behind.

I think it is a curious thing that so many of Jesus' stories about God's Kingdom are about bringing home those who are lost. The good shepherd goes in search of the lost sheep, the father rushes to greet his prodigal son who returns after wasting the family fortune- he showers him with blessings and throws a party.

Perhaps the 99 sheep who did not stray, felt a little resentful at the one who had got himself lost and subsequently became the major focus of the shepherd. We certainly know that the good son who stayed at home working dutifully with his father was resentful of his prodigal brother who had shamed the family. In today's story too the ones who worked all day in the vineyard grumbled that their reward was no greater than those who had come to work at the eleventh hour.

And can you imagine them?

The workers who were there at day break waiting to be picked would have been bright eyed, fit, ready and rearing to go. Those who were still waiting at the eleventh hour – standing around idly in the market place- no one had picked them – they would be the lost and the lonely, the sick and the sad- the least productive of all- no one ever picks them. And yet with only an hour left to work our vineyard owner does select them.

Why should they get the same reward as the hard workers? It doesn't make sense.

At another level though, perhaps they should reflect a little more. They have been greatly blessed and should be grateful for the privilege that has been extended to them.

In the prodigal son story the good son remained always under the roof of his loving and generous father with all the care, security and consolation that came with that, so too the labourers in the vineyard were in the presence of the good and generous vineyard owner all day long. They knew that they would be getting a fair day's pay to take home to their family. They were in a good and safe place. Rather than feel resentful they should feel grateful.

The others however in their inadequacy, with all their ailments and disabilities and shortcomings spent nearly the whole day anxious, lost and at the mercy of a heartless market.

During the week we had an encounter with just such a person at the parish house here in St Kilda East. A very deranged and damaged man came to the door offering to sell Fr Jerome some stolen merchandise in exchange for \$200. Naturally Fr Jerome declined but seeing the man's need offered him some food and a conversation. That didn't appeal to him very much so he went on his way and duly attempted to set fire to the trees at the front of the property.

When we went out to check for any damage and to make sure that the fire was extinguished the man returned and Fr Jerome and I tried to engage him in conversation and calm him down. His name was Paul but he was so irrational and out of control that all we could do was successfully deescalate the situation and get him to move on.

It was such a sad and frustrating experience because we wanted to help but the man was just too damaged at that moment to benefit from anything that we were capable of offering. At the same time, he was a danger to himself and to others and so we needed to inform the police.

I tell this story because it illustrates how difficult it is for us to act in the God like way of the householder of the parable this morning. Love your neighbour sounds easy but some neighbours are very hard to love.

There are those who deny the existence of God claiming that the whole belief system is merely a human projection. However, the image of God that we see in the owner of the vineyard could not be further away from a human projection. A human god would never care for the poorest and most broken and would seek to reward believers for their effort and success, but according to the parable, Paul from St Kilda would have found a place in the vineyard and would have been rewarded. That is how it will be in God's kingdom- there is a special place for Paul.

As I experienced this week, we are very limited as individuals in what rewards we can deliver for those who are suffering deeply. But as a community in the Church- the Body of Christ - we can do infinitely more.

Look at the legacy left to us by our great saints. St Francis of Assisi, St Vincent de Paul, St Mary of the Cross Mackillop, St Teresa of Calcutta and countless others who truly made us in our tradition a church for the poor.

The market place will do little or nothing to help Paul; as individuals we too are limited. As a church however, we can and do much to assist people who are in situations like that of Paul.

Today in the Archdiocese we celebrate Social Services Sunday where we recognise the work of all of those agencies which, on our behalf, go in search of the lost ones like Paul and bring the professional capacity, humanity and love of Christ necessary to lead them, here and now, into the consolation, safety and rewards of the Masters Vineyard- the Kingdom of God which is very near.

We give thanks for the work and mission of CatholicCare, the Society of St Vincent de Paul, Sacred Heart Mission and the many other organisations who work so hard to care for those who need practical expressions of God's love and healing.

The story today of that vineyard ruled over by a loving and generous householder, abundant in mercy, forgiveness and grace, is good news for the poor and the lost and is good news for all that is poor and lost in each one of us.