

25th SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME YEAR A

I've got a funny feeling that the trade unions might not be too excited about this Gospel. And I'm sure every parent has had to put up with a child whining, "Why do I have to do everything..... what about Johnny.... It's not fair!!" But the Gospel is a bit like that – it's not just about "being fair." In fact, I suspect it makes all of us a little bit uncomfortable.

In fact we're challenged in a pretty profound way by the parable of the vineyard. Jesus is a rabbi and a wonderful teacher. He uses parables as a consistent and powerful teaching tool. These are not simply neat stories that end with a moral twist – that's what fairy tales do. No, parables are dramatic challenges to the very way we think. They stretch the mind, the expectations, the hopes and certainties, and they confront the prejudices of the crowds who gathered to listen to this teacher from Nazareth. They open up new possibilities, new ways of seeing and behaving. So they are challenging and, very often they are disturbing. They point always to the pressing spiritual need for change in the life of every one of us, or "conversion" in the true biblical sense – and change is never easy or comfortable.

In today's Gospel, Jesus tells a story, a parable, about the way the landowner of a vineyard chooses to pay his workers. Those who arrive last to work receive exactly the same pay as the first arrivals. Every "reasonable" bone in our body may be groaning in rebellion at the unreasonableness, and even injustice, done to those first arrivals. They have worked long and hard in the heat of the day and yet receive no more for their efforts than the "eleventh hour" latecomers. Where are the principles of fairness and justice, the principles that are enshrined so much in our own Catholic social teaching?

Truly, the only way to make sense of this story and the message it contains is for us to change our way of thinking and seeing – to really hear the words in the reading from Isaiah, "the heavens are as high above the earth as my ways are above your ways, my thoughts above your thoughts." For Jesus, the only reality that matters is that of the kingdom or reign of God. This is reality and permeates and defines every moment of Jesus' ministry. The kingdom must be proclaimed faithfully, fully and without compromise.

The profound invitation made in and through the parable of the vineyard is expressed in those simple words: “Why be envious because I am generous?” God has a right to confer life and salvation upon all whom he chooses. It is not for us to try to limit God’s generosity. For us to do so is to completely miss the point of our whole faith and of life itself. Indeed it is not only that God chooses to have no favourites but that he has a deliberate love towards those who are last, least, on the edges. God desires that nobody be excluded from the banquet of life, and Jesus’ mission on this earth was to challenge any and every obstacle to this desire of the Father.

We are left asking today, before God: how generous are we really prepared to be in our Christian lives? The lessons we learn through the parable of the vineyard, and indeed through the whole sweep of Jesus’ life and teaching, are focused on being radically inclusive. This is not a case of “political correctness” but something much deeper and longer lasting. It is the invitation to be heralds of the kingdom. St. Paul understood what it means to be such a herald – to desire with our whole being to see the work of the kingdom brought to completion so that Christ will be all.

We are warned by Jesus of the grave spiritual danger of ever presuming ourselves to belong to some sort of spiritual elite. It is the religious non-elite who will be welcomed first into the kingdom. Well, how does that leave me feeling? Where do I see myself in this unfolding drama? Maybe, and even hopefully, it leaves me feeling spiritually vulnerable and poor. Then I have the opportunity to learn even more deeply the lesson for which Jesus gave his life on the cross; that it is by the pure graciousness and love of God that we are saved and brought into life.