

## 25<sup>th</sup> Sunday (A)

- Whenever I am in a group discussing today's gospel parable, we all agree that we are always somewhat uncomfortable with this parable.
- We tend to think, like the workers hired early in the morning, that somehow or other, what the landowner did was just not fair. **Why?**
- In something of an answer to that question I would like to tell you that when I was teaching moral theology & ethics in ACU some years ago, one of the most difficult concepts for the students to grasp was that of justice.
- I found it almost impossible to get them to appreciate the concept of *social or distributive justice* - that is, the kind of justice that demands an equitable distribution of the wealth of the world not only according to the ability & merits of each individual, but according to the needs of all the members of society.
- The students couldn't get beyond the idea of strict justice, *commutative justice*, as it is called - that is, the kind of justice that says each one receives his or her exact due, his or her exact recompense; full pay for full work, half pay for half work.
- It is *social or distributive justice* that is the basis of today's Gospel & the teachings of Jesus & the vision of Pope Francis, that the most vulnerable & excluded are the ones who need to take first place in our hearts & in our actions as individuals & as a society.
- This is particularly appropriate in our considerations on this Social Services Sunday as we think of the needs of the marginalized & vulnerable in our society, & the obligations we have towards them to create & maintain a healthy society.
- Over the years unions have negotiated new labour contracts for workers, thought out & worked out according to the principles of justice so that just wages are paid for workers. This is good & legitimate.
- But in considering them, I think that it is this kind of contractual arrangement, that is so good in itself, that we so unconsciously use as the model of our dealings with God; notwithstanding the fact that the prophet Isaiah tells us in the first reading for today that when it comes to God, God's thoughts are not our thoughts & God's ways are not our ways - notwithstanding this, like the students, we do not go beyond strict justice, & we do make our thoughts & ways the thoughts & ways of God.
- This idea of strict justice is so ingrained in us that we take it & apply it even to our relationship with God.
- We make religion to be a matter of doing things, so that, by doing them, we will merit, as our just recompense, our eternal reward in heaven.
- If we keep the commandments, if we say prayers, if we go to church, if we make novenas, if we receive the sacraments, if we pile up more & more good works & actions, then we will be holier & gain for ourselves, earn for ourselves, a higher place in heaven.

- We think, like the workers, that the harder we work, the more we deserve.
- Religion becomes a matter of striving for & working out & bringing about our own sanctification & salvation by our own strenuous work & effort.
- But Jesus is telling us that on the contrary, God's grace cannot be earned; it cannot be earned by any work we do; God's grace is absolutely gratuitous - that is, God's grace is a gift, an entirely free gift.
- God gives it whenever, wherever, & to whomever God chooses.
- This is what God told Moses right from the beginning: I am God who shows favour to whom I will; I am God who grants mercy to whom I will.
- God's grace cannot be demanded as our just due because of a good life; it cannot be claimed as a payment or a compensation or a reward; it cannot be merited by anything we do.
- God's grace is not a matter of justice; it is not a matter of quid pro quo.
- God's grace comes only from God's completely independent, autonomous goodness & generosity.
- God's giving of grace does not depend upon us - on the length or amount or quality of our work in the vineyard; it depends only on God's own free generosity.
- And, Scripture is telling us God is generous, giving grace liberally, to all, to the first & the last, to the greatest & the least, to the strongest & the weakest, to the saint & the sinner.
- This is the beautiful, wonderful thing about God.
- Sometimes we talk about the importance of believing, or not believing, in God; we forget that the important thing is knowing **what** God we believe in.
- There is a difference between believing in a God who is good to everyone, who "makes his sun rise on evil & good people", & believing in a God of law & order, for whom we have to calculate everything we do.
- To believe in a God as an unconditional Friend can be the most liberating, joyful experience we can imagine, the most invigorating force for living – & dying.
- In contrast, believing in a judgmental, threatening God can become a dangerous neurosis, destroying our humanity.
- All too often the latter is the god people have created in their own image & it is this god that many people have rightfully rejected.
- We must let God be God, & not shrink him down to our own size, box him into our expectations, or reduce him to our calculations.
- We can see God's true face by being drawn closer to Jesus, & the image of God he reveals is sometimes surprising & even scandalizing.
- It is not surprising that what led people to hate & reject Jesus was his proclamation of a scandalously good & loving God.
- So, inspired by the Gospel, may we see how fickle we can be in our dealing of justice & how more loving, forgiving, compassionate & extraordinarily generous God is & that we are called to conduct ourselves with his heart.