



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

25th Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year A

Is your eye evil because I am good?

Readings: Isaiah 55: 6-9, Ps 145, Philippians 1: 20-24, 27, Matthew 20: 1-16

It is, at first sight, an enigmatic story. It is not a fable with a simple and obvious moral outcome. It is primarily, as Jesus clearly flags up at the outset, a 'kingdom' parable.

We are given a picture of the householder who needs his vineyard harvesting. This is a picture of the continuing work of the Church and the end time of the judgement. All must be safely gathered in and, clearly, as events unfold, it must be done today. This today is the same 'today' of which the Psalmist speaks and St. Paul echoes later – that day that is the 'now' of God before the Judgement comes. There is an urgency to the task.

Those of you who go back a long way will remember the cruelty of casual labourer. The men got up early to queue at the dock gates to see if there would be any work that day. A few would be accepted, the rest turned away to face a day of shame, failure, hunger and the further falling behind of the family in the race of life. To be accepted was, however hard the work, a huge relief. You knew that that very day you could return home in triumph and put bread on the table. Your acceptance assured you of salvation. Were you selected because you were the best or the earliest? Not necessarily. All

we do know is that the first to be taken on were the lucky ones. The work was hard but the reward was certain.

Three hours later this owner goes out and finds men idle in the market place. They have not gone home in despair or to the tavern to spend the last of their children's bread in anaesthetising their misery. They remain on the market IN HOPE. And let us be clear it is not necessarily, humanly speaking at any rate, a reasonable hope.

Nor are these men guaranteed the day's pay. They are hired on trust. All that the Master says is that He will give them whatever is right. So, to their hope in the face of hopelessness, they now add faith, faith that somehow their work will merit some reward. They are not offered the secure knowledge of the early shift.

Those who are standing in the market place are described as 'idle'. We can read that two ways. Idle in its most neutral meaning is simply 'unoccupied', unemployed. There is no blame attached. The second way of reading is full of blame and judgement. Idleness is a condition that invites comment from the gainfully employed.

How do we regard the unemployed?

It is, of course, a category that includes everyone from the desperate jobseeker firing off hundreds of applications through to the man who has deliberately not worked for twenty years and would be appalled at the thought of the State obliging him to do so. What we do know is that the longer a man is not required to work, the more difficult it becomes for him

to get back into work and the more unlikely it becomes that any employer will take the risk. Unemployment is a blight now as it always has been in man's history.

In this parable there is no welfare state so the idle, of both kinds, stay in the market place. These now are the men that nobody has hired. They are nobody's first pick.

When the Master comes out in the sixth hour (midday) it is just conceivable that anyone taken in may get a bit of bread for himself. Those who wait against hope and find themselves in at the ninth hour must have wondered what, if anything, they were contracting for. The only promise they receive is that they will get what is right. There is no bottom line. There is no small print. They have to trust the Master.

Unbelievably the Master goes out at the eleventh hour and questions the remaining idlers who have stood in the sun all day, unwanted, unused, unpaid. 'Why are you standing here?' The truth is that no-one wanted them.

The Master invites them into the vineyard. Economically crazy decision. Humanly speaking it makes no sense. Divinely speaking it is eloquent. The day is never too far spent, even for the apparently hopeless who go on waiting and searching and hoping for acceptance and meaning and engagement and fulfilment.

At the end of the day the Master adopts a strange procedure of payment. The steward is to pay the last first. If this is not odd enough, He instructs the

Johnny come latelys, those who have not even broken sweat, to get the Denarius promised to the early birds who have done the full shift. It is a fair wage for a full day – but ridiculous for an hour. Already disgruntled by the reversing of the order the ‘real’ workers are even more discombobulated to discover that they get the same and their shop steward comes forward to remonstrate with the Master about the perceived injustice. What the shop steward does not understand and cannot quantify is the wider human dimension.

The latecomers and the lastcomers had no reasonable expectation of a living wage. They waited in hope and came in faith when they were finally called, grateful to be invited in for however little. The early birds lived the whole day with the certainty of their acceptance and the certainty that their prayer ‘give us this day our daily bread’ had been answered.

By paying the last first the Master immediately reassures and delights them that their daily bread has also been given.

The early birds, being human and sinful, immediately are incensed by the reverse order and yet clearly now expect a bonus over and above the daily bread. What they are **not**.....is delighted for their fellow workers who can now go home to their families and put food on their table. Jesus has the Master point out that He is in breach of no agreement. He has honoured His promise. Indeed He has chosen to be as generous to the last as to the first. And He makes this telling remark: In the Greek it says literally, *‘Is your eye evil because I am good?’*

The envy of the early birds is humanly speaking completely understandable but from the perspective of our wider humanity and, above all, from the perspective of the divine mercy, deeply unattractive. Worse still it is in danger of becoming a bitter interrogation of the mercy of God.

'I have been coming to Church all my life and suddenly this man who has only just shipped up here is given a job on the same level as me.'

'Why is she leading the prayer group?' 'Why is that newcomer serving?'

'It took me 40 years to become area leader of CWL and this woman has only been coming for five.' 'Why has that person got so many gifts and I have got so few?' 'Why are they so joyful? They wouldn't be as joyful as that if they'd been through what we have been through.'

Thank God that God is God and chooses whomsoever He will. Early or late if God chooses to put His treasures in any of our earthen pots we should rejoice. The sovereign liberty of God and His amazing bounty is all that saves any of us. We should never begrudge the outpouring of that generous mercy on the undeserving because that includes us.

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