

Together with the parable of the Prodigal Son, the parable we have listened to just now, presents us with the most controversial teaching Jesus taught. Both of those parables, to our way of thinking, are full of injustice, and yet, when we place ourselves in the role of the recipients, we could not be more grateful for the good fortune that smiled on us.

Today's Gospel story is really the fulfilment of the words we heard in our first reading, where we heard God say: "my thoughts are not your thoughts, my ways not your ways. Yes, the heavens are as high above the earth as my ways are above your ways, my thoughts above your thoughts."

Our ways are frequently competitive ways, legalistic ways, quid pro quo ways, but God thinks differently.

Let's take a look at the way Jesus portrays the landowner. He's up early to go to the marketplace to look for day-labourers in his vineyard, and it would appear that he is ready to take on anyone willing to take on the standard wage for a day labourer, - one denarius. Going back a couple of hours later he finds still others standing there, and tells them to go to his vineyard too, at the promise of a fair wage. He does the same at midday, mid-afternoon and finally at the last hour of daylight.

Notice that he doesn't appear to be in a panic about getting the work finished by nightfall. He is just ready to employ people at any hour of the day. Notice too that apart from the last group he asks no one why they were still standing there, and even then he accepts the excuse that no one has hired them.

There could be any number of reasons why they were not hired earlier. Some could be late sleepers, although that is unlikely. Some could be caught up with things at home, such as sick children that needed attention first; a pregnant wife who could not be left alone; an aged parent to take care off; they could have been promised a job elsewhere that did not come off, or an anxious running from marketplace to marketplace, always arriving too late, after employers had gone.

One thing the landowner knew was that they would all be anxious to get a full day's pay, so they could feed their children, pay the rent, save a few cents for clothing and other expenses. They would not be standing around simply because they didn't care whether they had work that day or not. So he hired them all.

The crunch came at knockoff time, and I believe that this is the reason why Jesus told this parable, a reason that's meant just as much for us today as it meant 2000 years ago. The landowner could have avoided a lot of trouble and murmuring if he had paid the early birds first. They would be gone the moment their pay was in their hands, and they need never have known about the generosity of the landowner. But he started with the last, giving each a full day's pay. It's a deliberate lesson Jesus gave, in where our priorities need to be; not on profit, but on the welfare of people. People and their needs are meant to come first, everything else later on.

With this parable Jesus is therefore teaching us a new social order which places people and their just needs at the centre, while profit and competition rank way down the line.

Over the centuries the Church has shown great leadership in striving to bring this about, - in responding to the care of the poor, the sick, the unfortunate, those in need of education, the fostering of human rights, and the protection of those unjustly treated, etc. Over the last 150 years this effort has been especially directed to the area of fostering the rights of working class people, beginning with Pope Leo XIII in 1891 writing an Encyclical called Rerum Novarum, dealing with new situations, based very much on the parable we heard today, where he called for just working conditions and a true daily wage that met the real needs of people, including care for those unable to work through sickness, disability or age. It's an effort that continues even today, as we find in Pope Francis' Exhortations about protecting the family and the environment.

This year's Social Justice Statement, called: "Everybody's business, developing an inclusive and sustainable economy", is the Australian Bishops contribution to this continuing effort of social and moral formation, and our support and participation in helping bring this about can only result in helping make God's Kingdom a reality in our time.

I believe there are some copies of that Statement available in the foyer or at the back of the church, but if not, those of you who are computer literate can find it simply by typing in Social Justice Statement 2017-18.

It's worth reading, thinking about and acting on.