

Who are you? Where do you come from? What do you do? These questions have started many a conversation. All three are important but it's the third one that is of special interest in the context of today's Gospel reading. What do you do? How do we answer that question today? Most people respond by telling the job they have. Jobs are important and we are judged by the type of work we do. But a great deal of work is done that is not paid employment. Work done by a parent in the home, for example, is real work even if it's unpaid. Do children pay their parents for the work done? Or parents complain because the children did no work?

Yet, after listening to the gospel, we too like the rest might be tempted to say: It is not fair. Why should the last be paid like all the rest? Often, we wonder the working of God. **His Justice/Mercy, his Generosity/Fairness.** The history of salvation is the story of his **boundless generosity.** First, he gives **life**, then after original sin he gives **hope** for salvation, then with the Incarnation he gives **redemption**, and finally, to those who faithfully work in his vineyard, he gives **everlasting heavenly bliss.** God is a **volcano** of generous love.

In the first reading from the prophet Isaiah we read: *"my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways. As high as the heavens are from the earth, so high are my ways above your ways and my thoughts above your thoughts."*

In today's gospel we hear of a harvest in which some workers put in more work than others. When pay time comes, they are all treated equally and the early birds among them begin to complain and grumble. Why do the workers in the vineyard complain and grumble? Because they are *unrelated individuals drawn from the wider society.* Whereas in the family we are *family members.* The norms of behavior, of contribution and reward, in a family are different from those in the wider society. The big question that the parable poses to us in the church today is, *"Do we see ourselves as family with a common purpose or do we see ourselves as a group of individuals, each with their own agenda?"* If we call ourselves brothers and sisters, then we are not rivals and competitors.

This parable has several implications. Matthew probably addressed this parable to his fellow Jewish Christians. God called them a long time ago to build the kingdom of God. Now, at an apparently late hour, God was calling the Gentiles to work with them in building up the same divine kingdom. The Jewish Christians expected a higher place than their late comer gentiles into the fold of Christ. **"who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.** They had difficulty in seeing that God was intent on building, in Christ, a kingdom where all peoples -- Jews and Gentiles -- would be family.

The notion of the kingdom of God as family is central to understanding this parable. The kingdom of God is a family more than a society. *A society is characterized by we-and-them, by rivalry and survival of the fittest. A family, on the other hand, is all we and no them. It is characterized by a spirit of co-operation rather than competition.* Today we are called upon to review our all too legalistic notion of the kingdom of God and see it more as a family where we are happy to *expect from everyone according to their means and give to each according to their need* -- as God our Father does. God's justice arises out of a sense of community in which we see the "eleventh hour" workers as our brothers and sisters whose needs are every bit as important as our own.

There's a play by Timothy Thompson based on this parable in which he depicts two brothers vying for work. John is strong and capable; Philip is just as willing but has lost a hand in an accident. When the landowner comes, John is taken in the first wave of workers, and as he labors in the field, he looks up the lane for some sign of Philip. Other workers are brought to the field, but Philip is not among them. John is grateful to have the work but feels empty knowing that Philip is just as needful as he. Finally, the last group of workers arrive, and Philip is among them. John is relieved to know that Philip will get to work at least one hour. But, as the drama unfolds, and those who came last get paid a full days' wages, John rejoices, knowing that Philip – his brother – will have the money necessary to feed his family. When it comes his turn to stand before the landowner and receive his pay, instead of complaining as the others, John throws out his hand and says with tears in his eyes, "Thank you, my lord, for what you've done for us today!" If we can be like John, the world would be a better place to live in.

For us today this parable is equally important. We can ask the same questions ourselves. Should a person who joined the Christian faith at the evening of his life receive the same reward as a person who spent the whole of his life in faith and prayer? Or again should a person who lived an irreligious life all through and got reconciled to God before his death receive the same spot in heaven as another who spent his entire life in prayer and charity?

A sparrow complained to Mother Nature, "You gave beautiful colors to the peacock and a lovely song to the nightingale, but I am plain and unnoticed. Why was I made to suffer?" "You were not made to suffer," stated Mother Nature. "You suffer because you make the same foolish mistake as human beings. You compare yourself with others. Be yourself, for in that there is no comparison and no pain." **God Bless us All.**