

LETTING GO... LEADS TO GRACE

Jonah 3. 10-4. 11

Philippians 1. 21-30

Matthew 20. 16

I speak to you in the name of ☩ the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

We could all tell our own version of today's gospel parable. Stop to think for a moment. I'm sure that you can think of, or that you know people who neither earned nor deserved what they got: it could be a job; a promotion; a pay rise; recognition; happiness; or success. And as we think of those people, we perhaps are still hurt by the fact that we worked longer; we tried harder; and it seemed to make no difference. It is proof that more often than not, we view the world, ourselves and others through the lens of fairness rather than grace; and this is the exact opposite of how God views the world and our lives.

From an early age, we were taught that *fairness matters*. Watch a bunch of children playing, and it won't be long before you hear someone say, "That's not fair!" We have only to think back to our own childhoods and such scenes will quickly come to mind.

And it's not just children. Adults want fairness, too. Too often, however, fairness (rather than love, acceptance, mercy, forgiveness or generosity) is the measure by which we act and judge another person or life's circumstances.

I think that we like fairness because it give us some assurance of order, predictability and hierarchy; even if it is a false assurance. Fairness is based on what we *deserve*: how hard we work; what we achieve; and the way in which we behave. Sometimes it is fair to give a reward; and at other times it seems fair to give a punishment. We live in and promote a society in which we earn what we get. Good or bad, we deserve the consequences of our actions.

But what happens when divine goodness supersedes human fairness? Well, you get today's parable. Today's parable suggests that wages and grace stand in opposition to each other. They are two opposing world-views. The degree to which this parable strikes us as unfair is the degree to which our life and world-view are wage-based. A wage-based world-view allows little room for grace in our own lives or in the lives of others.

Grace is dangerous. It reverses business as usual. 'So the last will be first, and the first will be last.' That's not how a wage-based society works. The world says that the last are *last* and the first are *first* because they deserve it. It's only what is fair. Our understanding of fairness, however, does not seem to have priority in the kingdom of heaven, where grace is the rule and not the exception. Grace looks beyond our productivity, our appearance, our dress, our race or ethnicity, our accomplishments and our failures. Grace recognises that there is more to us and who we are than what we have done or left undone.

You see, grace reveals the goodness of God. In contrast, wages reveal human effort. Grace seeks unity and inclusion. Wages make distinctions and separate. Grace just happens. Wages are based on merit. The only precondition of grace is that we show up and open ourselves to receive what God is giving. When we do, we begin to see our lives, the world and our neighbours differently.

Some of you may know that before training for the priesthood, I ran several communications consultancies. As head of those consultancy firms, part of my job was to assess how business was progressing on a regular basis; and that meant scrutinising the time sheets that were submitted to me each week by the consultants and support staff. As I looked at those time sheets, I could see how many hours each person worked each day, how many of those hours were billable to clients, and

indeed (for the senior consultants) which new clients had been brought in because of their business development efforts.

These time sheets (which many hated to fill out, claiming that they were the bane of their existence) were then used as a basis for performance reviews and for pay rises. In actual fact, those time sheets became the primary measure of an employee's 'worth'; and therefore became an incentive for comparison, competition, expectation and judgement. Today, and with the benefit of hindsight, I can assure you those time sheets were not adequate measures of the true 'worth' of those employees.

Grace reminds us that we are not nearly as self-sufficient, deserving or independent as a wage-based society would like us to believe. Neither is our 'worth' determined by our productivity or usefulness to another. Grace holds before us the truth that each person is more than his or her behaviour, looks, accomplishments and failures.

The tragedy of a wage-based life is that it blinds us to the presence of grace and the life of God in our own lives. A wage-based life can make us resentful of grace, goodness and beauty in the life of another. It can separate us and isolate us from others, because eventually, we set up standards and expectations not only for ourselves and others, but also for God.

That's what happened to the first labourers who were hired in today's parable. They saw themselves as different from, and more deserving than the labourers who were hired later. The first labourers grumbled against the landowner saying, 'These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us.' The truth is they are not *that different* from each other: neither group owned the vineyard; both groups needed a job; and both groups were chosen and invited in by no effort of their own doing.

There is, however, something that distinguishes the first labourers who were hired from those who were hired later.

The distinction is not what *time* they showed up to work; the real distinction between the first labourers who were hired and those who were hired later is the *terms under which they entered the vineyard*. Those hired first entered the vineyard only after agreeing to the usual daily wage. In fact, they settled for too little and they short-changed themselves. Apparently, the landowner was willing to pay more than the usual daily wage, because he paid the labourers who were hired later a full day's wage for less than a full day's work. 'That's not fair,' we might say. No, it's not: that's *grace*.

The labourers who were hired first got what they bargained for. Those who were hired later – those who came at 9.00am, at noon, at 3.00pm and even at 5.00pm – did not, however, ask for the usual daily wage. They entered the vineyard trusting that they would be paid 'whatever is right'. 'Whatever is right' is not determined by the first-hired or by a wage-based society, but by the goodness of the landowner. The labourers who were hired later received more than they earned, more than they deserved and more than they had a right to ask or hope for. That's just what God does. 'Whatever is right' isn't about fairness; it's about grace.

Why settle for the 'usual daily wage' when God wants to give you 'whatever is right' for your life, your needs and your salvation? 'Whatever is right' will always be more than fair, and more than we could ask or imagine. Yet curiously sometimes we trust a wage-based life more than we trust grace. And in so doing, we deny ourselves and others the life that God wants to give us. So how might we begin to move from a wage-based life to the vineyard of grace?

Well, we can stop comparing ourselves and our lives to others; and then we will create room for grace to emerge. We can refuse to compete in such a way that

someone must lose in order for us to win. We can trust that in God's world, there is enough for everyone. We can let go of expectations based on what we think we (or others) deserve. We can give God the freedom to pay 'whatever is right', knowing that God's ways are not our ways. We can make no judgements of ourselves or others. *That* is the way of grace, the way of God.

Imagine if we all *let go* of those four things that sprang from those awful time sheets: comparison, competition, expectation and judgement. Our lives will then be God-filled, and we will make space for the lives of others to be God-filled; and the world will, the parable tells us, look a lot like the kingdom of heaven.

Amen.