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25th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Date: Sunday, September 24, 2017 | **Season:** Ordinary Time after Easter | **Year:** A
First Reading: Isaiah 55:6–9
Responsorial Psalm: Psalm 145:2–3, 8–9, 17–18 | **Response:** Psalm 145:18a
Second Reading: Philippians 1:20c–24, 27a
Gospel Acclamation: Acts 16:14b
Gospel Reading: Matthew 20:1–16a
Preached at: the Holy Trinity Catholic Church in Braamfontein **in the** Archdiocese of Johannesburg, South Africa**.**

Last week we heard the parable of how the servant was forgiven his debts. The Lord was generous with his mercy and expected us to be generous in return. The Church also celebrated the Feast of the Apostle Matthew during the week and we read of how Jesus came and called Matthew. This scene is beautifully captured by Carravaggio's famous artwork and it is an opportunity for us all to reflect on God's calling to each of us. So it should be no surprise that today we hear of the generous call of God to each of us here today.

Today's Gospel is often called "The parable of the laborers in the vineyard" but it might as well also be called "the Parable of the generous and merciful employer". It offers a difficult lesson to internalize – but a very necessary one given the state of our country. With South Africa in the background, I wonder how we listened to the Gospel today? Did we, like the grumbling laborers mistake God's divine generosity for divine injustice?

We live in a country that is very unequal. This is not fake news. Nor is it even news. We all know that South Africa is a very unequal country – there are issues of unequal access to education, unequal access to employment, even unequal access to cultural experiences and social opportunities, and sadly, unequal access to the rights to enjoy life and, in far too many cases, to even live. The most outstanding of our politicians and leaders, in their rarer and rarer lucid moments of true leadership rightly challenge us to consider economies, systems and social contracts that lead to a greater and more equitable distribution of wealth. But Jesus in this parable is calling for more than just an equitable distribution.

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We could perhaps imagine and do a thought experiment for ourselves and conceive that at the time of Jesus there was also a high unemployment rate in Israel at that time, as there is now in South Africa. We might think of today's Gospel and see how Jesus' landowner generously hires people – he does not seek to streamline or increase profits, he hires more people, not just once, but throughout the day, and he pays them all equally – paying them what was considered more than a fair wage – perhaps we might call it a living wage today. Of course, this was in keeping with what the Torah of Israel said "There should be no one … in need" But our Society has long-sinced ceased to be governed by the Torah or Law of God. This logic is hard for us to understand in a world in which meritocracy, efficiency and profits are seen to be the indicators of success – indicators that naturally and popularly exclude by their very nature. To act justly, what the Prophet Micah proposed and what Paul would consider conduct worthy of the Gospel of Christ, may not always be popular, but for God's people it must become business as usual. Did our Lord not say "For I say to you, unless your justice exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter into the Kingdom of heaven".

After all, it is not enough for Christians to merely work towards redistributing wealth and opportunity as politicians might sometimes talk about (when they do take a break from redistributing things among themselves). No – the Kingdom of God that Christians are called to build is not one of mere justice, at its heart, as this parable teaches, it is one characterized by sheer generosity: the kind of generosity that we see in today's parable where the last are paid first and they receive in equal measure. This logic is described in the First Reading, when the Prophet Isaiah explains that God's thoughts are not our thoughts, God's ways are not our ways. As the Lord says: "For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts."

We can often be deceived if we think Justice is enough. As we've seen in our own country, Justice can be limited and slow, laws can be circumvented or even rewritten. And as Pope Francis never tires of teaching us: God's Justice is mercy, which is just another way of saying, that God's justice is at heart, generosity.

But this is not just a story about labour relations. We must ask ourselves what is it exactly that Jesus is being generous with? Beyond the parable, it is about him offering a relationship with himself to each of us. Some of us have known Jesus all our lives. Others have only lately come to know him. Perhaps there are some

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of you here today who don't know him but feel like you want to. This parable is Good News precisely because relationship with God is promised equally to everyone. God has no favourites. He loves each of us more than we could ever deserve. We cannot earn his love – we can only accept it as he generously gives it.

To accept this message requires a conversion on our part – a conversion away from human thinking to one of accepting God's generosity and mercy in our own lives.

It is a call for a conversion away from worshipping idols, to worshipping the one true God. Perhaps that conversion takes some time – perhaps we feel we are not there yet.

But we should not wait for He does not call the prepared; he prepares the called. And all of us at sometime receive that call – for Our Lord is ever generous with it.

But there is injustice in the parable too – but not with the Lord's generosity, rather with the grumbling labourers who have become envious of others.

Envy is not simply jealousy, which is the desire to attain or possess what another person has. Envy is the sin of being upset at another's good fortune.

Throughout the New Testament, Jesus teaches us that we must overcome jealousy and envy. Envy is that fault in the human character that cannot recognize the beauty and uniqueness of the other, and consequently denies them honour and dignity. In order to approach God, who is total goodness, beauty, and generosity, we must work towards preventing this attitude from taking root in our hearts. Envy can blind us and cause us to resent God's generosity, not only with others, but with ourselves.

Let us pray today that our hearts might not be hardened, or envious, but always open to God's call. Let us pray that we might convert our hearts and offer our lives to the service God is calling us to – even if it is at the 11th hour. Let us pray that we may respond eagerly and generously to God's call in our lives, and be grateful to our good and generous God.

Amen.

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