

25th Sunday

In this story of the labourers in the vineyard, the Lord reveals a very deep understanding of the human heart and of a particular sin which can cause havoc in some people's lives. The story tackles the sin of envy - one of the capital sins which, left unchecked, can be incredibly corrosive to the human spirit. Envy sees another person's blessing as injurious to ourselves. It's an ancient sin and it has been given new opportunities in these modern times. And we might take the opportunity, in this Mass, to think of areas of our own life where this sin might be a problem for us.

We used to speak of “keeping up with the Joneses” - reminiscent of looking over the garden fence at the neighbours and trying to better them. The thing is, that fence is now in our pocket as the temptation to envy has been industrialised by social media. Rather than simply hearing from family, friends and colleagues about the successes of their lives and picturing them in our mind's eye, now we get to see them in all their glory on our phones, tablets and computers, along with aspects of the lives of people we will never meet. But the pictures on social media don't always tell the whole story.

We may see a smiling group photograph, but not the tensions at play behind it. We may see the luxurious holiday or the beautiful new kitchen, but not the debts that may linger long afterwards nor the arguments behind the scenes. We may see the promotion being celebrated, but not the toll that success so often takes on a marriage, a family, a life.

The danger lies in comparing the edited highlights of other people's lives with the unedited reality of our own. It's in the inequality of that comparison that the path to envy can open up, playing on our insecurities and leading us to resent what others appear to have while losing sight of the good things in our own lives.

It's a tendency termed by psychologists as “upward social comparison”. And it leads, inevitably, to seeing our own lives as lacking something.

Well, this parable challenges us to rejoice in the successes of others and not to see them as a threat to our own existence.

In Palestine in Our Lord's time, casual labourers lived precariously. They gathered in the marketplace each morning hoping to be hired because without work, quite simply their families would go hungry. A denarius was the usual payment for a day's labour - it wasn't lavish, but it kept the wolf from the door.

So, the landowner hires labourers at daybreak, then returns at nine, noon, three and even at the eleventh hour when only sixty minutes of daylight remain. He asks the last group, "Why have you been standing here idle all day?" They reply, "Because no one has hired us."

They have not necessarily been lazy; they have simply not been chosen. Maybe they were older or weaker.

Well, this landowner sees those whom others have overlooked. He sees beyond their economic usefulness and recognises their need. Because they too have families waiting at home; and they too possess a dignity greater than their commercial value. And so we see the genius and compassion of Christ shining through this story like a laser, cutting through the world's calculations of what a person is worth and revealing, instead, their tremendous value in the eyes of God.

In a wider way, the parable reminds us that the economy exists for human beings, not human beings for the economy. It speaks to the elderly person who can no longer work and the person living with disability. To the unemployed person repeatedly passed over, and the parent or carer whose labour may go unappreciated. Jesus is declaring that their dignity remains undiminished, whatever value the market place might put upon their work.

And, as evening falls, even those hired at the eleventh hour receive a full denarius. Inevitably, those who had worked since morning in the blazing heat of the day expected more, but they received the amount which had been agreed.

They have not been cheated. The landowner fulfilled his obligation. It's in seeing others receive the same as them that they become resentful, and so fail to rejoice that another family will be fed that night. They're not bad people but they've been corrupted by the sin of envy which takes hold of their insecurities and makes them feel that they have been wronged.

We need not look far to recognise the envy has taken a hold of us in life. Someone else is thanked while our work appears to go unnoticed. A family member receives the attention we long for and feel is owed to us. A newcomer is warmly welcomed, and we wonder whether our years of quiet service count for anything.

Given free reign, envy has the power to stall careers, break marriages and fracture communities.

At the heart of the parable stands the landowner's question: "Are you envious because I am generous?" It is a question that reaches into our relationship with God. Can we rejoice in His goodness to someone else without feeling that He owes us more?

The parable also helps make a distinction between wages and grace. A wage is earned and owed whereas grace is freely given - like that denarius to those who arrived at the eleventh hour. We can never place God in our debt and it's a mistake to try to do so.

Because His grace is not like a cake divided into slices, so that the larger one person's portion, the smaller another's must be. Material possessions diminish when divided, but the laws of physics apply differently in the spiritual world. Spiritual goods increase when they're shared.

So if we do find ourselves suffering from the sin of envy, what's the remedy? Well, the great spiritual writer Thomas a Kempis, who wrote the Imitation of Christ in the 15th century, he suggested that the best remedy for envy is humility which frees us from any urge to compare our worth against someone else's blessings.

Prayer, too, is a remedy. By reviewing our life at the end of each day and appreciating the many gifts that God has given us we become more able to purposefully and sincerely congratulate those who have had success in their lives.

These are the ways in which we find a path of resistance in terms of the temptation to think that another's good fortune somehow detracts from our own wellbeing. Often, the heart follows where actions lead, deeds can shape attitudes. And, so, in putting our prayer into action we can loosen God's grace within us, and so strengthen our efforts to better resemble the person He wants us to be.

At the end of the day, in the parable, every labourer receives the same denarius. Yet the same generosity that brings joy to one is a source of grievance for another. And that is the tragedy of envy: we can hold God's gifts in our hands and still feel unfulfilled because our eyes are fixed on what He has given to someone else.

But there is a deeper truth here. The final gift God offers us is Himself: a share in His own life and love for all eternity. And another person's welcome into that love takes nothing away from us. No one becomes less precious to God because someone else is precious too. Whether we have borne the heat of the day or arrived at the eleventh hour, none of us could earn so great a gift.

Perhaps, then, this parable asks us a more searching question than whether we are content with what we have received. The question is 'are we willing to allow God to mould our heart so it better resembles His?' If we can apply this question to those individual situations of our own life which might have come to mind today, then we will find that, as in so much of His teaching, Jesus has opened up a path for us. It's a path that leads to the peace in this life for which all our hearts are searching. It's up to us whether we decide to follow that path to peace or continue on the path of envy.