

Gospel text

Matthew 20: 1-16

1 Indeed, the domain of God is like the story of a great boss: he left his house early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard. 2 After having agreed with his workers a salary of one denarius a day, he sent them to work in his vineyard. 3 When he went out again around 9 am, he saw others standing in the public square, without work. 4 He said to them, "Go to my vineyard, and I will give you a fair wage". 5 And they went there. Again he left his house around noon and around 3 p.m. and did the same. 6 At around 5 p.m. he went out of his house and found others standing there. So he asked them, "Why did you stay there all day without working?" 7 They replied: "No one wanted to hire us". He said to them, "Go, too, to work at my vineyard". When the evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager: "Call the workers to pay everyone their wages, starting with the last hired, to finish with the first". 9 When they arrived, those hired at 5 p.m. received a denarius. 10 When their turn came, the first employees thought they would receive more, but they too received a denarius. 11 When they received it, they began to grumble at the owner, 12 saying, "These last have only worked one hour, and you treat them as equals to us who have borne the brunt of the day and the heat". 13 So addressing himself to one of them he replied, "My friend, I am not unfair to you. Didn't you agree with me on a denarius? 14 Take what is due to you and go back home. Because I want to give to the last hired as much as to you. 15 Can I not do what I want with what belongs to me? Besides, why are you looking at me crookedly because I'm good? 16 So there are some who are last who will become first, and some who are first who will become last.

Gospel commentary - Homily

The right investments

Recently, I attended three days of conference related to information technology. At one of these conferences, I saw a translator for the hearing-impaired near me, back to the lecturer, who was gesticulating with her mouth and hands. Looking at whom she is addressing, I saw another woman who was watching her. After 15 minutes, the translator was replaced by another, then 15 minutes later by another, because it is a demanding job where you are exhausted quickly. I asked myself: how can we afford the luxury of 3 translators for a single hearing-impaired for 3 days? This conference was intended primarily for people in the public service, and we must recognize the effort made in terms of equity. But is there something disproportionate here?

It is however in a context of disproportion that we must read the Gospel of this Sunday. We often call it: the parable of the 11th hour worker: the man who worked one hour receives the same salary as the one who sweated all day. Instead of speaking of "equal work, equal pay", we should rather speak here of "unequal work, equal pay". Are we not facing a form of injustice? To do so in my workplace would not only raise outrage, but would have a demotivating effect. But then, what is Matthew trying to translate from the vision of Jesus?

We know the world of business and commerce well: I give you according to what you give me. We are talking about return on investment, profit margin, cost reduction, producing more with less. As a manager, this is also one of my goals. However, what happens if you want to have a child? Are we still talking about return on investment? How will we act if one of our children has a genetic disease and requires expensive care? And there are children who must be given more time, energy and money so that they are on the same level as the others. We are far from a strictly business relationship. Because we see children as a part of us, we look at them from the inside, we love them. The parable tells us that Jesus extends this vision to a world much larger than his own children.

Where does our difficulty in entering this vision of things come from? Why are we tempted to say like early workers, "Why do you treat others like us when we have worked so much more?" Our temptation is to take a business look at everything, including God. Our temptation is to forget that the most important things in our life have been received, and that it is normal to want to give back. Our temptation is to believe that our worth depends on the littleness of others. When one cannot manage to look at people with love, like a mother over her children, others easily become rivals and one can no longer rejoice in their success, even less understand that they may have been more in need of help than we are.

The business world has its own rules which are of great value, as they have helped to improve the living conditions of many people. But they apply to the limited world of products and services, and they must be subject to this broader worldview as proposed by Jesus. What would you think of always asking yourself the question before Peter, Mary or Dan: what does he or she need most? What would help him or her the most? What would you think of asking the same question before the various populations of this world? Is not helping people in order they be on the same level as others the best investment?

What Jesus brought to the people on his way had no measure with what they could have deserved. The Church of Matthew, made up of many traditionalist Christians of Jewish origin, seems to have found it difficult to accept that the community considers these converted "barbarians" on the same footing as them, them being these long-time faithful who had to endure the persecution. But all these late coming converted barbarians became our fathers in the faith and passed on a tradition of life to us. The baton is now in our hands.

-André Gilbert, Gatineau, June 2005