

# Sunday Homily

## 15<sup>TH</sup> SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY

20 SEPTEMBER 2020

YEAR A

“Are you envious because I am generous?”

Matthew 20:15

### Introduction

Anyone who has anything to do with young children, whether as a parent or as a teacher or in church, knows that one of their most frequently uttered phrases is, “It’s not fair!” The issue may be the amount of food on plates, or turns with the ball, or bedtime, or possession of the best crayons, or any number of things, but the cry is still the same: “It’s not fair!”

Where do small children get this sense of fairness? It seems to be built into human nature, a sense that the world should be a fair place but often is not, and that human beings have the right to protest if things are not fair. And this sense stays with us as we grow up. We grumble if we feel someone else has got the promotion we deserve. We protest if our rightful needs are not met, especially if those of our neighbour are.

At its extremes, this sense of the importance of fair play can lead to horrific action. Not long ago a man who had in fact been cleared of wrongdoing was killed by his neighbours because they thought he was guilty of the crime of child molesting of which he had been accused. He should get his just deserts, they thought, and so they took matters into their own hands.

### Gospel Teaching

This human sense of fairness is what gives the parable of the workers in the vineyard its shock value. The landowner hires some labourers at the beginning of the day, and agrees with them their pay, the normal daily wage. He goes again and hires some more at midday, some more in the middle of the afternoon, and some more still at the end of the afternoon. When pay time comes, those hired last are paid first and get the normal daily wage. The first to be hired see this, and expect more. It’s only fair that they should be paid more, for more work. They are disgusted to be paid only the normal daily rate, even though that was what they had initially agreed.

I wonder whose side you are on when you hear this story. Do you think that those first workers have a point? Think of your workplace. Would it be fair for everyone to be paid the same, without regard for the effort they put in? The landowner’s response to the objection is really thoroughly unsatisfactory; he can do what

he likes with his own money. True, but it does not address the issue of fairness, which is the problem here.

How might Jesus' first listeners have reacted? We can perhaps imagine the audience expressing agreement with the first workers. "It's not fair;" someone in the crowd might mutter, "they should have got more for all that extra work." But perhaps a more thoughtful person in the crowd might say, "But the workers who were hired last, how were they to feed their families if they were paid only for an hour?" "Ah," someone else might reply, "but that's their own lookout if they hang around the marketplace all day instead of doing a good day's work." "But perhaps it wasn't their fault," replies our first listener, "perhaps they did their best to be hired, but there wasn't enough work to go round that day. Isn't it better that the landowner should be unfair than that children should starve?"

You see where our imaginary discussion has taken us. It has shifted the ground of the debate from issues of individual fairness, to broader issues of justice in society.

## Application

My imaginary debate is one that we all need to have with ourselves from time to time. The example of the neighbourhood vigilantes shows how easy it is for our inbuilt human sense of fairness to get out of hand. It is good to pay attention to what is fair. But it is also right to think beyond issues of individual rights, to pay attention to broader issues of justice in society.

But this is not just a story. It is prefaced with the words, "the kingdom of heaven is like..." This is a story about God, who we suppose is represented by the landowner. "Are you envious because I am generous?" the landowner asks the workers, and by analogy God asks us. "Yes," we might reply. "We want to get what's rightfully ours." But we might then remember how little we deserve God's generosity towards us, and be willing to share that generosity with others.