



25th Sunday in Ordinary Time Year A - Johnny Come Lately

Homily by Fr Robbie Low

Readings: Isaiah 55:6-9; Ps 145; Philippians 20c-24,27a; Matthew 20:1-16a

It may seem odd at first sight to be returning from a wonderful pilgrimage to the Eternal City, only to preach on the significance of labour disputes and industrial unrest in the scheme of salvation.

But that seems to be where the Gospel today points us.

Bear with me a little.

I have been around a long while now and, like many of you, remember well how many clergy from the mid 1960s onwards, of all denominations, seemed to equate the coming of the Kingdom of Heaven with the accession of proto-Marxist governments. Some even went as far as to align their version of 'church' with the sub-plots of Liberation Theology, much to the disgust of the then Pontiff, St. John Paul II who swiftly reaffirmed that the destiny of the temporal goods was always the result of the view of the destiny of our eternal goods – not the other way round. Those who, like St John Paul II, had witnessed and, indeed, lived through those unhappy times and places where such reductionist materialism held sway had inevitably suffered much. They endured and, if lucky, survived to reject the vicious and murderous tyrannies that were required to impose this error – that is the attractive sounding but philosophically incompatible and practically unworkable union of the Liberty and Equality so fundamental to the Marxist illusion. The usual result of the triumph of such bogus political economics over theological truth was dictatorship, famine and slaughter on an industrial scale. The family unit and networks, its social and human functions of love, care

and welfare were replaced and superseded by the ravenous demands of a primary and exclusive loyalty to the State. There is no political solution to the state of the STATE. Only Conversion.

So, you will be delighted to hear that that is not my subject for today – or, more importantly Jesus’.

Today’s parable of the unequally paid workforce resonates with me every time I encounter it for two very personal reasons.

First of all because in my very first parish in the East End of London in the 1970s, many of the working men were dockers, usually at the great East India dock where the prows of the ships hung over the main road.

The men would queue up at the gates to see if they would be hired that day. Mass at the parish church reflected that in its timings – 6 a.m. every weekday. If it were any later then it would be impossible for the dockers to pray and still get to work. In short, thereby, the Church served her people. Today, when most churches have weekday services mid-morning if at all, we should not be surprised that the demographic is ‘grey’. The timetable inevitably excludes the workers.

The Gospel story takes us through the ‘hiring process’ so familiar to the dock families. The pay for the day is standard and agreed at the start. The subsequent need for more labourers is answered by those still waiting outside and who agree to come in, when required, on trust, no particular reward guaranteed. But at the end of the day, in Jesus’ story, the boss pays them the same as those who worked from the dawn. Those ‘first in’ are outraged at this perceived injustice and perhaps, initially, we understand them. But look a little deeper. The dawn men have worked all day – true. Their wages and reward, subsistence, are guaranteed. The later comers expect less logically and the early birds expect that differential to be respected. The last blokes in must have had very small expectation of reward but they came anyway. When they all get the same ‘divi’ the industrial dispute balloon goes up, as it were.

The Master’s response is simple and shocking and, if we ponder it at all, shaming. ‘What is it to you what I do with what is mine? Are you angry because I am generous?’ The exact phrase is...

Why do you look on me with an ‘evil eye’ – jealousy trumps joy.

A sour and resentful response. The complainers are not happy that those who, for so long, were without hope should be, not only rescued but equally rewarded with what is enough i.e. their daily bread.

But what at first seemed unfair is now revealed as glorious.

I think here, of course, not only of the dockers in my Anglican parish of half a century ago, often waiting without much hope, outside the gates of their economic salvation. But I think also of men like me who only entered the vineyard of the Catholic Church of Jesus Christ around the tea-time of our lives and yet have been given the same as those who have laboured all the weary day. And other men and women who have come late, later or very late and received of the Lord of the Vineyard the same reward.

What I want to say here is very simple and I can only speak for myself though I suspect others, if asked, would testify the same.

Unlike the 'johnny come latelys' of Jesus parable I have never experienced the slightest resentment, jealousy or questioning of God's mercy and generosity in calling me home among my fellow labourers here. There could have been many reasons for my brother priests to feel hard done by but they have never complained. Many reasons for the laity to question why this oddball should have been inflicted on them. But, on the contrary, both priests and people have been unfailingly welcoming, extraordinarily encouraging, accepting of all our eccentricities – well most of them – and keen to work the shifts, with us and for us, as both fellow servants of God and brothers and sisters in Christ. And sharing that precious daily bread which is our life together around the altar of the sacrifice and in the mission field of the world and especially this mission station of our parish.

That has been your regular and loving response to today's gospel.

It is something for which, over our many years together, I have always been immensely grateful to God and I just wanted to take this Gospel-given moment to say to all of you – for your generosity of heart and for that love - 'Thank you'.