

I am sure we have heard enough of Jesus' parables to know that they are never simply stories to amuse. So often, by the time he gets to the end of a parable, those who are listening were shocked. He always seems to upset something in the way they think about things. This is very obvious from the reaction of the workers in the parable we have just heard. But I suspect that there might also be many in our day who shake their heads in disbelief, wondering how the landowner could have paid a full day's salary to those who only worked during the last hour. This might be particularly the case in our Australian society where we pride ourselves on giving everyone a fair go. We have a deep-seated sense of fairness, and there doesn't seem to be anything fair about what happened in that parable.

As I thought about it, it struck me that the strange thing is that we only think this way if we identify with the workers who were hired first. What if we identified with the workers who were hired last? What would we think then? So, this made me wonder who Jesus wanted to speak to in this parable. Perhaps it was those who arrived last. So, what is the parable about? Jesus begins by saying that the kingdom of heaven can be compared to a landowner who hired workers. If that is the case, we can expect that it is going to make us think about the kingdom and thus about God. As is often the case in the parables, it might challenge our instinct to want to make God look like what we think God should look like. But in addition to that, because it is about God it will also be about human beings and their relationship with God.

If we want to hear what this parable says about God, then I think we must hear the question Jesus puts on the lips of the landowner, "Why are you envious because I am generous?" This is our starting point – that a fundamental way of thinking about God is that God is generous. But it is a generosity that exceeds human imagining and is not going to be constrained by human limitation. The prophet Isaiah in the first reading reminded us of how great the gulf is between God's ways and human ways when he used the image of the distance between the heavens and earth. Yet, because God is generous, we also heard a message that God is close. The psalm tells us that God is near to all who call on him, that God is kind and full of compassion, and that God's greatness cannot be measured. Isn't this what we see in the parable? The landowner who pays the last arrivals the wage that was promised – and which happened to be the same as promised to the first lot of workers – is a sign of the greatness of God.

The parable also invites us to think about how human beings are in relationship with God. To understand this, we do need to focus on the last workers. They did not deserve the wage they received. They were purely and simply the recipients of the mercy and compassion of the landowner. This tells us a lot about the relationship of human beings with God. We come before God aware of our weaknesses and failures, especially in the face of God's goodness. This is where faith comes in. It is because of faith that we trust God to raise us up and draw us into his divine life. We trust God to love us and keep calling us into relationship with him. We realise that God gives according to his love and not according to our merit.

I think that is what we recognise today in a very concrete way with the Rite of Acceptance of our candidates for baptism. Each of you, in your own way, has heard the call of God. In some way, you have been like the workers in the parable who, no matter how you heard this call or when you heard it, have now been invited by God to be part of his life and to make God part of your life. In the months ahead as you prepare for baptism and Holy Communion, you will in many different ways and on different occasions, experience the God of mercy and compassion. You will come to know the generosity of God and the love of God. It will be a love that you will want to return, loving God as he loves you.

There are also important lessons for all of us who gather here week after week. As people who have experienced God over many years, we have the privilege of being the place where God's love is made visible not just to these candidates but also to the world beyond the community. The way we live can prompt people to ask about God and eventually to want to know God. This requires humility on our part as we recognise God's compassion to all his creatures and as we watch the mysterious ways in which God works in people's lives. Unlike the workers in the parable who were hired at the beginning of the day, we can rejoice that God is generous.