

Our son Richard once worked for Bird's Eye as a fork-lift driver at their factory in Hull. As you probably know the peas cannot be picked until they are ripe, and when they are ready they must be harvested quickly, and frozen before they deteriorate. Hence extra people must be employed and time is crucial.

The parable in today's gospel - known as the parable of the good employer - describes a similar situation. It was autumn in Palestine and time to gather the grapes. Since the rainy season was at hand, speed was essential and extra hands were needed urgently. One morning at dawn the owner of the estate - the employer - went out to engage harvesters. The first group he came across, he employed at a pound a day - and they got stuck in. About nine am. he came across some unemployed men and he took them on - agreeing to pay a fair wage. So they started work. At noon and again at three pm. he did the same. Then at about five pm. (only one hour before sunset) he met some more unemployed men. He said to them; "Go and join the others in my vineyard."

An hour later darkness fell, bringing the work to an end. Then he did a surprising thing. He called his steward and instructed him to pay all the labourers the same wage - one pound for the day. This gave rise to an industrial dispute. The men who had worked hard all day, naturally took a dim view of this equal pay policy. "These layabouts have worked for only one hour and yet you have put them on an equal footing with us who have borne the heat of the day . Is this fair? Is this what you call justice?"

"Look my friend", said the employer, "Didn't we agree on a pound a day? Well, that's what you received. Surely I am free to do as I wish with what is mine?"

Industrial disputes are not peculiar to the present day - they were a familiar part of life even in biblical days. Jesus, in all his parables, used situations which were part of people's normal everyday experience. "The kingdom of God is like this" he would say, and then tell a story about a housewife who loses a coin, or a farmer who build's bigger barns or a man who gets mugged or, as in this case, the harvest. The principles of life in the kingdom of God are illustrated in these parables. In this case, Jesus is teaching the principle that in the kingdom of God, our rewards are not measured by what people think they deserve. Thank God that we don't receive what we deserve - if that were true we would be in a sorry state indeed. The rewards of the kingdom are measured by what we need - not what we deserve. God treats us in the same way as the good employer treated those unemployed men. Jesus is saying, "this is what Almighty God is like - and because he is like this and acts like this - so do I". The employer, out of sheer generosity and compassion for the unemployed, pays as large a wage to those who have worked for one hour as to those who have worked all day.

Of course, Jesus is not laying down principles of industrial relations. He is telling us something fundamental about the kingdom of God. God is like that good employer. His judgements are not like man's judgements.

The Pharisees were shocked and indignant about this. They sensed that Jesus was implying that they were on the same footing before God as the publican's and sinners with whom Jesus mixed freely. The divine generosity was clearly exhibited in the calling of the publicans and sinners who had no merit before God.

But someone is bound to object that the story is out of date. Are not the Pharisees long dead and buried. But are they really? Does not every generation throw up its Pharisees? In the days of John Wesley many pious church people criticised him for taking the gospel to the working class uneducated, uncultured people. In the days when Nelson Mandela was a prisoner in South Africa, many pious church people supported the South African government in their policy of separate development for black people.

Jesus pulled no punches in his condemnation of this kind of hypocrisy. "Alas for you lawyers and Pharisees, hypocrites that you are. You shut the door of the kingdom of heaven in men's faces; you do not enter yourselves, and when others are entering, you stop them".

Jesus tells us that there is an equal reward for all in God's kingdom. An equal reward for even the poorest and least worthy of Christ's followers along with the great saints throughout the ages; St. Paul, St. Augustine, St. Francis and Martin Luther. It doesn't seem to be fair in human terms - but it is the will of God and it is certainly wonderful news for us.
