

25TH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME, A  
GOD'S EXTRAVAGANT GENEROSITY

*“My friend, I am not being unjust to you; did we not agree on one denarius? ... I choose to pay the last comer as much as I pay you. Have I no right to do what I like with my own?” (Matt. 20: 13-15)*

***Some years ago, back in Nigeria, I had the privilege of wedding a ninety-year-old man on his death bed.*** He was a very prominent and well-travelled industrialist, who never really cared about his faith and fate. On his dying bed, he requested for me, as his parish priest then. When I arrived, I went into the room where he laid. He asked everyone else to leave the room. Together, he told me about himself, confessed his sins and was very grateful to God for all the successes he accomplished in life. He was so sorry that he did not realise this earlier than then. Finally, he asked me: “Father, can God forgive me even now?” I told him: “Yes, God can. He knows your heart. He has made this encounter possible for a reason.” With this assurance, he requested that he would like to wed with his wife. I invited the wife and she gave her consent with excitement. Immediately I baptised him. Marriage documents were expedited and the wedding was done with the other necessary sacraments within one week. He died about six hours after the celebration. My man here would qualify for the labourers in Jesus’ parable in the Gospel (Matt. 20: 1-16) who were invited to the farm at the eleventh hour and got the same payment as those who came in the first hour.

***Jesus tells this parable with a seemingly unjust ending to present to us another perspective of the Kingdom of Heaven.*** It tells us of different groups of workers who were invited to the vineyard at different times from the first hour (6 am) to the eleventh hour (5 pm) and all was paid the same amount for the work done. This parable could be interpreted from many optics with plausible insights. It could be understood to refer to privileged nations, people, race, caste, ethnic group, and individuals who were more open to Christianity at the beginning and those who were resistant but later became converted and are saved not minding the time they repented and turned to the Lord. Whatever the case may be, Jesus is using this parable to teach us some timeless lessons about the Kingdom of Heaven.

***In the economics of the Kingdom of Heaven availability and patience are very crucial:*** The first thing we notice in the parable is that all the labourers assembled at the same place. They all came out and waited to be employed. They were available and ready for work. The landowner went out at different hours and each time, he found these men waiting. They never left in anger. They never lost hope. They were not envious of the others who were employed before them. They were

patiently waiting in hope for their turn. We have to be ready, available and patient for the Lord's visitation and invitation. Remember the man who laid by the well for thirty-eight years (Jn. 5: 1-15)? He never gave up, that is why he got the miracle. Do not give up, the Lord knows your needs and He knows you are waiting.

***In the economics of salvation, time is irrelevant:*** In the First Reading (Is. 55: 6-9), the prophet reveals to us that God's "thoughts are not your thoughts, my ways are not your ways." This is a theme that captures the deeper meaning of this parable of Jesus – everything in this parable runs against our preconceived notions of justice. In the divine chronology, time is calculated by compassion and grace. The men who were employed at the first hour worked for twelve hours, and the men who came last at the eleventh hour and worked for only one hour, had the same amount of payment because, for God, all service ranks the same. It is not the time spent, not the amount of work done, but the love that God has for us. The time spent and the work we have done, by themselves, cannot earn us salvation. Salvation is a good life, blessed by grace. Remember the thief on the right side of the Cross (Lk. 23: 39-43)? To add to these, St. John Chrysostom tells us that God calls us when we are ready to respond.

***In God, justice is mercy and His mercy is His justice:*** From the mere human point of view, it does not seem just to pay someone who worked for twelve hours the same amount as the one who worked for one hour. But the point here is that, with the first labourers, the landowner had "made an agreement with the workers for one denarius a day" (Matt. 20: 2). With the second to the last set of workers, he simply said: "You go into my vineyard too and I will give you a fair wage" (Matt. 20: 4). Perhaps the ones who deserve more praise are those who came later because they showed more interest in the work than in the wage. However, another thrust of this parable is to show God's immeasurable and unfathomable extravagant generosity and compassion to all who respond to His call irrespective of the time and age.

***Be content, rather than envious:*** After the master paid all parties the same sum, the first-comers grumbled because the others received as much. Envy is a grievous sign of dissatisfaction; it expresses discontentment; it blinds us from seeing the favour done to us, and it prevents us from being grateful. It is a sign of being upset at another's good fortune. Contentment should be our disposition to every one of the Lord's favours. It opens the treasures of heaven for more blessings. "Rejoice with those who rejoice (Rom. 12: 15).

***My dear friends,*** let us pray for our society that we may create just environment, where everyone's right to work and just pay is made possible. Let us be available

and ready to respond to the Lord's call whenever He comes; let us be content with what we are blessed with so that we can be thankful; let us make the best use of our time to render the services we can to God and our neighbours. Let us not forget that what God gives is grace, not justice; a gift, not a reward; a favour, not merit; a privilege, not a right. Know that God always has plans for us, it may be slow and delayed but come, it will. Therefore, let us learn to wait with hopeful patience (Hab. 2: 2-3).