

Once a man has truly experienced the mercy of God in his life he will henceforth aspire only to serve.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, 1906–1945

Equality of opportunity is not enough. Unless we create an environment where everyone is guaranteed some minimum capabilities through some guarantee of minimum income, education, and healthcare, we cannot say that we have fair competition. When some people have to run a 100 metre race with sandbags on their legs, the fact that no one is allowed to have a head start does not make the race fair. Equality of opportunity is absolutely necessary but not sufficient in building a genuinely fair and efficient society.

*23 Things they don't tell you about capitalism* / Ha-Joon Chang. 2010

### Related topics

*For further study:*

Grace; reconciliation; forgiveness; morality; Law of God; images of God; Christology; sacrament of baptism; sacrament of reconciliation; conversion; discipleship; reign of God; mystery of the church; social teaching of the church; service; vocation

### Closing Prayer

God most high, your ways are not our ways,  
for your kindness is lavished equally upon all.  
Teach us to welcome your mercy towards others,  
even as we hope to receive mercy ourselves.  
We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son,  
who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,  
God for ever and ever.

*Opening prayers, Ordinary Time 25, Year A<sup>2</sup>*

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<sup>2</sup> *Opening prayers : scripture-related collects for the years A, B and C from the sacramentary* / International Commission on English in the Liturgy. – Norwich : Canterbury Press, 1999.

## Proper 20

*(Sunday between 18 and 24 September inclusive)*

### Principal Service readings

Jonah 3.10 – 4.11	Jonah's grievance and God's answer
Psalms 145.1-8	Praise God's power and love
Philippians 1.21-30	To live is Christ, to die is gain
Matthew 20.1-16	Parable of the labourers in the vineyard

### Opening Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ,  
speak to our hearts in the stillness,  
keep us steadfast in the foundation that cannot be shaken,  
lift up our eyes to behold the vision of your glory;  
and perfect our faith, now and always. Amen.

Society of Saint Francis

### Gospel Reading

#### *Parable of the labourers in the vineyard*

[Jesus said to his disciples]: "The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire labourers for his vineyard. <sup>2</sup>After agreeing with the labourers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. <sup>3</sup>When he went out about nine o'clock, he saw others standing idle in the market-place; <sup>4</sup>and he said to them, "You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right." So they went. <sup>5</sup>When he went out again about noon and about three o'clock, he did the same. <sup>6</sup>And about five o'clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, "Why are you standing here idle all day?" <sup>7</sup>They said to him, "Because no one has hired us." He said to them, "You also go into the vineyard." <sup>8</sup>When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, "Call the labourers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first." <sup>9</sup>When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. <sup>10</sup>Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. <sup>11</sup>And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, <sup>12</sup>saying, "These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat." <sup>13</sup>But he replied to one of them, "Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did

you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? <sup>14</sup>Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. <sup>15</sup>Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?" <sup>16</sup>So the last will be first, and the first will be last.'

Matthew 20.1-16 NRSV<sup>1</sup>

## Comments and Questions

This parable is unique to Matthew, and appears to be an illustration to the saying in 19.30 (=Mark 10.31) about the last being first and the first being last, a saying that is repeated in Matthew 20.16 (and Mark 10.32-34). However, the connection between the two is weak as they are only similar in the order of payment (20.18). The order is necessary, otherwise how would the first workers hired know what the others received, but the core of the parable lies in the hiring and paying of workers. The house-holder goes to the marketplace at various points in the day and hires workers. At the accounting in the vineyard the owner is called 'lord' or 'master' and this is where the payment is made. The workers hired first protest (20.11-12) and the owner responds (20.16-15). The owner's defence of his generous action joins direct statements and rhetorical questions.

Although the parable is traditionally titled 'the workers in the vineyard' it might be better titled as 'the good employer' since he is the main character from start to finish. Underlying the parable is the identification of the employer with God. However, this should not be taken too far. Identifying the steward (20.8) as Jesus is going too far in the direction of allegory. Similarly, the latecomers are the tax collectors and sinners are the ones who have turned their lives around in response to Jesus. The ones who were hired first are the scribes, Pharisees and other observant religious people who have been religiously observant all along, but these parallels should not be pushed too far or made too precise.

The key to interpretation is seeing the vineyard as a symbol for Israel. This is the same symbolism that underlies the vineyard parable in Matthew 21.33-46. The symbolism is drawn most obviously from Isaiah

5.1-7: 'My beloved had a vineyard ... the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel'. Joined with the vineyard symbolism is the idea of the last judgement as a harvest (see Matthew 13.39). The fact that the landowner needs more and more workers indicates that the harvest-time is near. At the end of the day there is a settling of accounts and distribution of rewards. The person overseeing this is the lord/master (*kyrios*) of the vineyard.

The particular issue treated in the parable is why the latecomers receive the same reward as those who have been labouring all day. The answer is that the kingdom is God's gift and we should not complain about God being generous.

We can imagine in the parable that the workers not picked initially are those who are less able, like the elderly and the disabled. Jesus was criticised for his concern for the marginalised, and his association with people deemed disreputable. This parable appeals to the generosity of God. So, if God is generous to the latecomers, what about those who had worked all day? Well, their wages had been agreed with them in advance, so they were getting what they had agreed to.

An underlying theme of the parable is the relation of justice and mercy. The Matthean community was criticised by other Jewish groups for following Jesus' lead and accepting 'tax collectors and sinners'. In this parable there is a rationale for accepting them – God's mercy.

## Quotations

1

Always seek justice, but love only mercy. To love justice and hate mercy is but a doorway to more injustice.

*Healology / Criss Jami, 2016*

2

Trust the past to the mercy of God, the present to His love, and the future to His providence.

*St Augustine, 354-430*

<sup>1</sup> *New Revised Standard Version Bible* is copyright © 1989 Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America.