

## Only God sees the full picture

The core of the Gospel parable is also in the Isaiah passage: “My thoughts are not your thoughts.” Try as we may, it is impossible to justify the payment of the workers in the vineyard in ordinary social terms. It could hardly be said to be fair. Yes, the owner is generous to the last comers, but why is he not generous to the others as well? It is simply that there is no reckoning up deserts when man meets God.

In Our Lord’s time Judaism had reached a legalistic state, and the mentality was prevalent that salvation could and must be earned. There were many commands which must be fulfilled, and people were divided into two classes, the righteous who were on the road to salvation by fulfilling the commands, and the unrighteous, outcasts despised by those who kept the law. It was this slot-machine conception of God that Jesus opposed by his emphasis on love, for in love there is no calculation of duties, rights and obligations; there is only an open-handed giving without counting the cost, and a grateful receiving. We can never say that we have earned our salvation, or anything from God, but can only stand suppliant before him. The latest workers in the vineyard have not earned what the owner gives them, and the mistake of their envious colleagues is to think that they can deserve well of the owner.

Devout Christians may find it hard to stomach that someone who repents on his deathbed is admitted to the kingdom no less than those who have struggled and suffered all their lives for what is right. But this would presuppose a commercial attitude of reward and punishments from God, and it neglects the nature of love. The relationship of the believer to God must be personal love, and as such it is its own reward, for it brings its own happiness also in this life. The greater the struggle, the more Christians turn to God and find comfort in the security of his love. Also, fidelity through a long life does bring some advantage over a skimpy final conversion, for it may well be that the relationship of love has so deepened over the years that the Christian, faithfully following Christ, has more capacity for the full enjoyment of God’s company than one who comes to know God only at the last moment. Here it is not a matter of God giving a greater reward, but of the person being more capable of receiving it.

Of this joyful relationship with God Paul was a shining example. While threatened with persecution he is filled with the joy of Christ. His life is already united with Christ’s life, and he longs for the fulfilment of final union.

The parable of the vineyard-workers is no blueprint for labor relations, but it illustrates very well Jesus’ teaching about grace and mercy. There are consequences to be drawn, and, in *The Joy of the Gospel*, Pope Francis wrote: “The Church must be a place of mercy freely given, where everyone can feel welcomed, loved, forgiven and encouraged to live the good life of the Gospel.” (§114)