



# THINKING ABOUT WORKING AND WORKERS

KATHLEEN RUSHTON writes of the parable of the labourers in the vineyard in Matthew 19:30 – 20:1-16 as the core of the Gospel.

**T**he parable of “The Labourers in the Vineyard” begins and ends with two similar verses and has two parts. In the first part, the vineyard owner “going out” at five different times hires labourers (Mt 20:1-7). Each time he agrees to pay the labourers “the usual daily wage” of one denarius which provided subsistence living for a family for a day. In the second part (Mt 20:8-16), as evening comes the vineyard owner instructs his manager to pay the labourers.

The contrast between the groups in the reversal of the order of payment, their treatment and responses are crucial to this puzzling story which parable specialist Adolf Jülicher calls “the core of the good message, of the Gospel” – its kernel.

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## Socio-Economic Background

Jesus connects with the world of his listeners to reveal some aspect of real life in the alternative household (*oikos*) of God which he is building throughout his ministry. In contrast, the details of the parable reflect the socio-economic situation of a wealthy *oikos* in Roman-occupied Palestine.

The *oikos*, the basic unit of society, consisted of three relationships (husband-wife, father-children, master-slave) and the task of earning wealth. In the three pairs, the former rules over the latter. This parable is in Matthew 19-20 where Jesus addresses critically the relationship of husband and wife (Mt 19:3-12); children (Mt 19:13-15); a rich man and his wealth (Mt 19:16-30); and uses the image of masters and slaves (Mt 20:17-28). In all these areas, Jesus opposes the use of power to “rule over” others.

The owner (*oikodespotē*) is described literally as “master of the house” (Mt 20:1) and as lord of the vineyard (Mt

20:8). Wine brought in greater profits on cultivated land than grain. Because of economic changes dictated by Rome, many vineyards had changed from being family owned and operated to being owned and managed by wealthy landowners. Many families were uprooted from peasant farms because of foreclosing on debt or being forced from family plots because they were unable to provide for their families. Consequently, day labourers were a common sight in the marketplace and would have seen in the owner one of those responsible for their plight. These “expendables” were not permitted to seek work. They had to be invited to work.

In this androcentric – man-centred – text, we do not see any women or children whose lower paid work was crucial for poor households. It is striking that the owner addresses one of the labourers as “friend” (Mt 20:13). His surprising generosity functions within the concept of a landowner who could do what he liked according to Roman law.

### What Does Jesus Expect?

What is the intended reality behind the image? What kind of transposition or switching from the world of the story did Jesus expect from his audience? The parable both captivates and irritates those listening. They are forced to reflect. A breakthrough may occur on three levels.

First, those listening may realise that the parable points to God as God is known and experienced by Jesus. God is radically different from human perceptions. God settles accounts and gives freely much more than a person merits for an hour of work. God breaks through what human reasoning holds to be strictly just. Will listeners allow such a God into their lives? Behaviour is challenged: Are you jealous because of my goodness to your neighbour?

Second, in this parable Jesus reveals how God works. Jesus has been given a hard time because he brings God’s gifts of goodness and mercy to outcasts – the sick, tax collectors, unclean, sinners.

Third, listeners are drawn into the parable. Jesus does not give us the labourer’s answer to vineyard owner’s questions (20:11-15). Each listener needs to give her or his answer, not in the story, but in the concrete situations of their lives and to be moved by the vision of God presupposed by this parable.

### “The Core” of the Gospel

Jesus is teaching us about God – convincing us to lay aside jealousy and our sense of unfairness and to invite into our lives the God of Jesus. The parable calls us to conversion: to proclaim with our lives the God of Jesus and rejoice in the gifts of others. Philosopher Paul Ricoeur believed we must tell the parables of Jesus in ways that those listening will be “once more astonished” – so touched to the core of their being that they are called to conversion.

The alternative household – a household of disciples in which one does not “rule over” the other – is called to a way of life in which all human beings have equal value. The parable is framed with a general saying: “So the last will be first, and the first will be last” (Mt 20:16) – we are called to create a new social world.

How does the parable unmask attitudes of privilege and entitlement in regards to equality in our Christian community? How are newcomers to a parish included? How are the increasing numbers of immigrant groups included? And recent Catholics as opposed to lifelong members? Is my parish an alternative household or do competitive and acquisitive attitudes prevail?

COVID-19 has been a time to support workers and to be aware of vulnerable migrant workers on temporary work visas. The concept of a “living wage” emerged as a response to growing poverty and inequality that continues to hold back many Kiwi workers, their families and our economy. The Living Wage Movement Aotearoa New Zealand brings together community, secular, union and faith-based groups to campaign for a Living Wage. We can consult their website and support those organisations listed there who pay workers the Living Wage and advocate for businesses and organisations we associated with to take steps to work towards following their example.

And we can reflect on how this parable is the kernel of the Gospel because we, too, are labourers of the eleventh hour. We, who emerged so recently in Earth’s evolving story, are blessed abundantly by God’s grace, loved and called to transformation. 🌱

20 September – Matthew 20:1-16  
RL 5th Sunday in Ordinary Time  
RCL 16th Sunday after Pentecost

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## COVID-19 NATIONAL RECOVERY APPEAL

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Cardinal John Dew



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