

DO YOU BEGRUDGE MY GENEROSITY? – Biblical Commentary by F. Alberto Maggi OSM

Mt 20.1-16

At that time Jesus said to his disciples, “The kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard. And going out about the third hour he saw others standing idle in the marketplace, and to them he said, ‘You go into the vineyard too, and whatever is right I will give you.’

So they went. Going out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour, he did the same. And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing. And he said to them, ‘Why do you stand here idle all day?’ They said to him, ‘Because no one has hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You go into the vineyard too.’ And when evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, ‘Call the laborers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last, up to the first.’

And when those hired about the eleventh hour came, each of them received a denarius. Now when those hired first came, they thought they would receive more, but each of them also received a denarius. And on receiving it they grumbled at the master of the house, 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.’ But he replied to one of them, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what belongs to you and go. I choose to give to this last worker as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?’ So the last will be first, and the first last.”

It is not easy to accept a God who instead of rewarding the good and punishing the bad, offers his love to all. “He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good,..” (Matthew 5,45), This kind of God seems unjust, like the master in the parable told by Jesus (Matthew 20,1-15). In it a landowner hires laborers for his vineyard. The importance of the work is that the master himself must leave the house at dawn and go to the square in the town and hire the laborers.(Matthew 20,1). The pay was one denaro a day, and it is this that the master ensures the workers. The great availability of manpower meant that a single call of workers would meet the needs for the entire day. But, surprise, towards nine o'clock in the

morning, the master goes out again, to search for other workers. He does not do it for the need in the vineyard, the first call was sufficient, but to hire others who are unoccupied and without work, which in that society meant that they did not eat. The master thinks of their needs. And for this he promises to pay them on the bases of the work done (“.. that which is just.” Matthew 20,4)

At midday, the master finds himself yet again in the square, and hires other workers and the same happens at three o'clock in the afternoon. Now the workers in the vineyard are enough, but the master is more preoccupied with the fact that there are people without work than in his own interests. And it is almost sunset, towards five o'clock in the afternoon, when the master goes in search of other people that no one has called to work. There is only an hour until the end of the working day, so no one will call them now. They have not worked, therefore they will not eat. If no one has thought of them, the master of the vineyard, also calls these workers, but without talking of any pay: they will not even work an hour, and will be paid with a crust of bread.

The town square is deserted. No workers are searching for work: they are all at the vineyard, that is bustling with workers. Those that had begun work at dawn, had been happy to see the others arrive during the day to help with the work; with their help the work had not been too heavy. Their happiness is transformed into enthusiasm when they see the master begin to pay the last arrivals, those that had worked less than an hour, and give them one denaro: it is not a pay but a gift. If those that had worked an hour were paid that which had been agreed on for the first workers, for the whole day, those that had suffered the burden and heat of the whole day certainly would be given three times as much.

But when these see that they are paid with one denaro, as had been agreed, they vent their disappointment and their discontent, because they were sure “*..they would receive more,*” (Matthew 20,10), and think that the master is unjust. The master of the vineyard has not been unjust (that which had been agreed on had been given), but generous. He took nothing away for those that had worked since dawn, but wanted to give the same pay also to the last workers. Defending his behavior , the master of the vineyard thinks of himself as just (“*Friend, I am doing you no wrong.*” Matthew 20, 15) Jesus sees in the vineyard owner's attitude that of the Father.

God is not a severe master, but a generous one that does not repay mankind according their merits, but according to their needs, because his love is not given as a prize, but as a gift. What motivates his actions are the needs of mankind, his happiness. And if to some this attitude seems unjust and is not acceptable it is because he “*...begrudge my generosity*”(Matthew 20,15), is that of greed and envy, like he who does all for his own convenience. They will never understand the act of a God who does not “*seek his own interests*”(1 Cor.13,5), but those of mankind.