

Are you envious because I am generous?
Sermon on Matthew 20: 1-16

Sisters and brothers,
on the first Friday of this month we came together here at Peace Church to worship with women – men and children of course too – worldwide. It was the Women’s World Day of Prayer.

Peace Church is hosting it for ecumenical English-speaking women from all over the world every year. And every year we are part of a great wave of prayer that goes round the world for 24 hours. The first service begins on Samoa, and the last is held in the Eastern parts of America. During this time an estimated 3 million women, men and young people, in 170 countries and islands are praying with and for the people of the country from which the liturgy each year is coming.

This year it came from the Philippines.

And with it came a beautiful painting of a Philippine artist and a most challenging Bible text. The piece of art is on the front page of our bulletins this morning, and the bible text we just heard as the gospel reading.

Rowena, the painter, is 32 years old and a Methodist. She says that she loves to express her feelings and her insights by painting. It is her way of meditating and it keeps her mind healthy and refreshes her heart.

What a wonderful thing to say! Rowena also says that she loves to paint women – their struggles, their lives, their relationships with husbands, children and other family. She finds every woman beautiful, and when women empower and support each other, she says, they can be strong, confident and courageous.

What she painted for the Women’s world day of Prayer is a most colourful picture of a tall woman standing in a world of vivid colours.

The right side of the painting suggests lush vegetation, beautiful beaches, blue seas and plentiful harvests.

The left side suggests grey, high buildings and the changing face of industry. The woman with the child appears forlorn. The child reading in the top of the picture seems all alone. The three women in the front of the picture hold up a banana leaf on which there is an abundance of food unevenly distributed. All the good food is on the right hand side, while on the left are only fish bones.

The woman in the centre is covering her right eye, so that she cannot see the destruction and poverty beside her. She holds a pair of scales weighted towards the plentiful harvest. Both sides of the picture show the reality of life of the Philippines. Only half of the people have what they need for everyday life. The other half is suffering, starving, being exploited, neglected and denied their human rights.

With the women who put together the ideas for this service Rowena holds fast to the truth that God is a fair and just God who wants the resources of this world to be distributed fairly and equally.

She says: “God gave the Philippines abundant resources, both human and material. God is the great provider and provision is for all of creation. This is God’s display of economic justice in contrast to the economy where the strong and powerful take God’s resources

for themselves and their families. The kingdom of God provides for all, no matter what...”

Our Bible verses were written in the context of an agriculture-based economy. The grounds are prepared, the crops are planted and tended, and the community is waiting for harvest time and the harvest. If there is plenty rain the plants will grow, thrive and bear fruit. On the other hand, incorrect care, including pests and insects, bad weather or other accidents, natural or human-made, expose the crops and decrease or spoil the harvest. Since the place is stony and hilly, preparing the grounds and tending the plants can be exhausting work. In addition the weather conditions (hot, humid or cold) add to the discomfort of the labourers.

The work is seasonal and intense.

Harvesting crops, such as grapes, has a strict timeline in order to reap the fruit in its prime and while it is juicy and sweet.

When harvest time comes, the master of the vineyard starts to recruit people. In fact, the workers are milling around the marketplace waiting for an opportunity to work in the vineyards. Some of them may already be former labourers in the vineyard who the master knows... should the harvest be exceptionally good though, he needs more people to help. So people keep waiting in the marketplace hoping that they will have at least a bit of work that day and earn some money to take home to feed their families.

The labourers called for this purpose are mostly hired hands for a short period of time. They have no permanent employment...

This biblical situation, the women from the Philippines say, is very similar to the context in their country.

In Philippine country side where the economy is driven by the production of sugar, there are workers who live on the plantations. They are given a modest place for shelter with their families. During the off season they do all sorts of other little jobs. They are the first ones to be hired in harvest time.

Often women and children are hired too. Babies are on the backs of their moms, with little or no protection from the dust and the heat...

For the more intense job of harvesting however, where there is a time limit for a certain produce like sugarcane or rice, the workers are recruited by agents or contractors. They bring in a large number of men from another place to do the harvesting. The labourers have to leave their families for a number of months, so they usually ask some portion of the wage in advance to take care of basic family needs. Those payments are considered loans with interest. And one can imagine that after the harvest season, the interest will eat up the wages of the workers, and they will have only very little to take home to their families. The wages are also far below the standards for a decent life. They can only feed one or two people at the most. Taking into account that the average sized Filipino family has six family members, it becomes clear that the income of a typical labourer is never enough for his family.

The economic injustice is evident.

The landowner has a big house and enough food on the table, while the families of the labourers live far below the standard of a decent life.

This situation occurs in many more places of this world – not only in the Philippines. We all know that.

It is a situation similar to the reality in the Philippines, in which Jesus speaks to the people in the Gospel story.

He told people about little scenes from everyday life, speaking about human life and God at the same time. The stories from the everyday life of the poor and ordinary people became a window through which those listening were invited to see God.

Long before and long after Jesus' time there was a living culture of telling stories. This was how people tried to describe and explain life and talk about God.

These stories were always open...

They were an offer – to listen, to reflect, to seek and find.

And Jesus' stories usually took place in the world of the slaves, the day labourers and the hard-working women and children.

The story of the workers in the vineyard describes an everyday scene from the working world of those days. Early in the morning unemployed men gathered in the market place and waited for the working day that was beginning. Day labourers were more practical and less expensive for landowners than slaves. Slaves he would have had to buy and then care for – interested of course in their further capacity for work.

If you were a slave, you received at least a minimum of bread and care, whereas day labourers were kind of slaves at their own risk. Which means: there were days without income and without bread, and because nobody owned you, nobody would make sure you had something to eat to keep you going. There were days of disease, and because nobody owned you, nobody was interested in your health – even if it was only to exploit you again after your recovery...

Day labourers were born free, but poverty enslaved them just the same. The living conditions of day labourers were more miserable than those of slaves.

Jesus shows a very precise knowledge of the working conditions of day labourers. The parable gives all the important details:

First of all the landowner hires men for the whole working day, from dawn to dusk. He concludes a contract by mentioning the amount of money they will be paid. They shake hands. Confirmed. The day labourers know that they will be paid in the evening, because the Hebrew Bible requires this of the employer. And most employers observe this law.

Our text supposes that one denarius is something like the absolute minimum to survive; however we may wonder whether it would also feed the labourer's wife and children...!? On the Philippines it doesn't...

The employer in Jesus' story then hires further labourers in the course of the day; at nine o'clock, at noon, at three o'clock and at five o'clock in the evening.

Those hired last only have about an hour's work ahead of them; then the sun will set.

The landowner does not mention any amount of money to the second group, but indicates only that he will pay them a fair wage. He does the same with those who are hired late...

The last group can hardly expect money – perhaps a handful of grapes to take home...

The employer seems to calculate in stages the amount of work that still needs to be done... He is careful not to hire too many people right from the beginning. He doesn't want to pay more wages than absolutely necessary.

There is a lot of pressure on the workers to work quickly and effectively.

In the second part of the story a steward is mentioned who supervises the work and pays out the wages. And then the evening scene is described... The landowner, the employer, must have completely changed his mind... he seems to have a totally different attitude. He is – in fact – unrecognisable.

The employer pays everyone the full day's wages regardless of how long they have worked. He seems to see and understand that even those who are unemployed and find little work need the denarius in order to survive.

In paying these wages the landowner is going by people's needs rather than by their achievement. He would of course have had the right to pay far less – or, as I said before, just let those hired last go home with some of the fruit.

What we see next is just so human.

Those who have worked a long time, come and protest. They only see their own achievement and not the needs of the others. Whatever has changed the landowner's mind has not yet touched their spirit.

And the ending of the parable is an open one... with the wordless invitation of the employer to those who have worked a long time, to open their hearts and grant the unemployed the denarius they so desperately need to survive.

What starts as an everyday scene becomes the overthrow of the current rules. In a society orientated by profit, the employer changes his behaviour completely.

Not a word is said about God. Only the introduction to the parable mentions God. There is mention of the kingdom of heaven, of God and no one else being king on the earth, that's all.

Everything else is up to people's own thinking and understanding.

What is going, through your mind now...

this story Jesus told teaches those who hear it to see the misery of the unemployed; to see the pressures of an economy orientated to profit; to see the victims of this economy – those who are standing unemployed in the market place from six in the morning to five in the evening, still waiting.

Our parable encourages people to think that change is possible!

This employer changes his whole concept of life. His orientation to profit, income and money at any price vanishes for the sake of the survival of the poorest.

And those who witness this change, those who'd worked long and complain, are invited to show solidarity, understanding and joy...

At no time does the parable of the workers in the vineyard draw conclusions to tell us what to do. It presupposes that whoever hears it, will relate to it and find ways to establish justice in a similar way as it is established in the story.

Small steps to support others to survive...

What could they be for us?

But back to the time, when this story was first told:

It is not only, but partly, because of such stories that Jesus had to die.

Not only because he told them, but because he lived them.

He befriended all those who nobody had employed... the poor, the sick, the outcast. And they understood his story best!

They understood: if life is meant to be as in this story, if God acts even more mercifully than this landowner then everybody will receive a fair wage, then everybody will have enough – not only to survive but to live life in all its fullness – and in dignity – and in peace – no matter how much the individual can achieve or has achieved.

If life in community, life in our society, is meant to be like in this story, then we all have a future to look forward to and a purpose that makes life worth living.

Jesus challenged the people of his time. He provoked the upper class with his talk of God and his mercy and justice, but he comforted the poor and oppressed with his vision of equality and his confirmation of God's goodness and mercy, which we all need for our lives.

Are you envious because I am generous?

Then and now many people are waiting desperately and full of hope for Jesus' story to come true.

I don't have fixed answers to how this could happen. I only see the many people who are waiting for a life that is not dominated by achievement and profit, but ruled by the needs and desires of every individual human being – no matter who they are...

How much do you need so that you and your family can live – in terms of dignity, bread, time, freedom...?

That is the question God would want us all to ask, in order to make his kingdom come true.

And God wants us to ask this question in community, because it is only together that we can make smaller or bigger steps towards the justice shown to us in this unusual story.

When God is around, be prepared for surprises.

Be prepared to think again about what is right and just and fair.

Be prepared to change your mind about what goodness and generosity mean.

Be prepared to see other people in a new light.

Allow God time and space in this world, and you never know what might happen... - the women of the Philippines share this hope with us and many others around the world.

And our response should clearly be to offer our hands to feed others and open our minds to become instruments of fairness, justice and joy.

Amen.