

**Reflection on the Gospel- Twenty-Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time Year A
(Matthew 20:1-6a)**

-Veronica Lawson RSM

In the early 1970s, as a student in East Jerusalem, I would cross the road at about 7am each day from my rental quarters at the Chaldean Patriarchate to the grounds of the Ecole Biblique. I would see the Palestinian day labourers lined up beside their vehicles, waiting for employment. In the aftermath of the Yom Kippur War, these people were living through hard times. In the morning, they were chatty and cheerful. Those who found work no doubt remained cheerful: they had the means to support their families and could find some meaning in their lives. Those still waiting for work at midday or later were dejected and shamed, not least by the prospect of returning home without their daily bread. Those who were hired found honour in the society and the means to sustain themselves and their families. Those who missed out on work suffered hunger, indignity and a sense of powerlessness. Confronted by this spectacle day after day, I began to understand the parable of the labourers in the vineyard.

In Matthew's parable, those who have worked all day grumble because the underemployed are made 'equal' to them. They are in fact equal as persons. Jesus makes it clear that people's worth is not to be measured in terms of their capacity for economic production. Pope Leo XIII, writing about the condition of the working class back in 1891, echoes this aspect of the parable. It is worth revisiting Pope Leo's encyclical and recent commentaries on its relevance for the shaping of social policy in our times.

Those who cannot find work and those who cannot work because of sickness or disability or visa restrictions know something of the experience of the Palestinian workers. Their needs are no less urgent than the needs of those who have productive and well paid employment. Even minimal social security benefits might address their basic material needs but are less than effective in addressing the underlying issues of human dignity.

Parables yield meaning differently in different contexts. Some of us may want to consider the corrosive effects of 'envy' or raise questions about the concentration of wealth and power in the hands of the landowner. Others, conscious of the plight of asylum seekers and refugees, may come with questions about 'generosity' offered from a base of power over against equal access to the world's resources. In the face of climate change, many of those who used to be 'first' in economic terms now find themselves with huge debts. They may not be quite as desperate as the Palestinian day labourers. They nonetheless find themselves 'waiting in line' as never before. There's an invitation in today's story for us all to live in ways that promote quality of life for every one of Earth's inhabitants.