

25th Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)  
(Isaiah 55:6-9 / Matthew 20:1-16)  
24.09.2017

### Competition & Envy

Cain and Abel (Gn 4:1-7), Rachel and Leah (Gn 30:1), Joseph and his brothers (Gn 37:5-8), David and Saul (1Sam 18:8-9), all these characters have in common that they were caught up in relationships marked by envy and jealousy.

From the beginning of our human and religious history envy seems to be a feeling which is strongly rooted in human hearts.

The problem is not just that we may hurt or disagree with one another; the problem is not only that we may dislike somebody; the real and excruciating problem is that we seem to be wired for competition, we need to envy what others have, who they are. So often we cannot look at others without comparing ourselves to them.

Very early in age, school, society and sometimes even the Churches seem to be continually reminding us that we have to be the best, the first, at the top. Obviously this is not necessarily all bad, in a positive way it can help us to learn and grow to our full potential. However we must acknowledge that at the core of competition there exists a profound insecurity stemming from the thought that we are not good enough. And what accompanies this is often a lack of awareness of who we truly are: a blindness to the value that is ours.

In the Garden of Eden, the serpent disrupted all our relationships: our relationship with God, with others and with ourselves. The appearance of sin in our lives renders difficult the way we relate to ourselves: we are no longer sure of our own worth and identity. So we are constantly in need of validation and struggling either with an inflated ego or with low self-esteem. This inner instability has an impact upon our relationships with others: either they are seen as a threat or used as a means for self-gratification. Competition becomes a way to prove ourselves to ourselves, to God and to others.

Before going on to speak about today's Gospel reading, it is important to be clear that Jesus' parable here is not about wages policy or minimum wage requirements. It is, as he says at the beginning of the story, about "the kingdom of heaven".

In this parable we discover that the mindset of competition is based on two faulty premises. The first is that it assumes that, at the end, there is a finite sized pie – that vision implies the more success there is in another person's life equals less success in mine. But quite frankly, this thinking is incorrect. The size of the pie is not finite. God's love is infinite as he himself is infinite.

We are all supposed to receive the same share in the Kingdom. Life in the presence of God is not ruled like an apartheid regime. All those who enter the wedding hall are welcomed at the top table.

The second faulty premise is that God can give more or less of himself. To imagine that God would give more of himself to some and less of himself to others is in total contradiction with what happened on the Cross: the same complete self-giving of Christ to all was made there. In the Kingdom God gives himself totally and generously.

This explains why the landowner cannot give more than one denarius to the early-comers and less than one to the last-comers. God is generous to all.

In the context on the Kingdom of heaven, the gift does not depend on what we do, on whether we arrive at the first hour or at the last. The gift of God precedes anything we can accomplish, it is never a due, it cannot be the result of our achievements but always the gracious and generous gift of God.

This parable is a vivid and powerful illustration of the prophet Isaiah's words: "My thoughts are not your thoughts, my ways not your ways". While we are tempted to measure and weigh anything we can give, our God is generous beyond all that we can imagine, he is generous in a way that challenges deeply our sense of competition and our need for hierarchy.

The necessary first step in order to be freed from the grip of envy and jealousy is to rediscover how much we are loved by God, just how precious in his sight we are. This experience should liberate us from comparison and an obsessive spirit of competition. Learning to celebrate our own giftedness, we become able to celebrate the gifts of others and rejoice in their success without envy. As we root ourselves, who we are, in God's generous love, we discover that we do not have to feel insecure or threatened when a brother or a sister is better than us at something, when he is acclaimed and celebrated, when she is praised and recompensed.

The second step is an antidote to the poison of competition, envy and jealousy: it consists in learning to be generous. Generosity challenges at its roots our habit of measuring and weighing out what we give to others. Generosity goes beyond what is due and what is expected. Because generosity does not depend on what we think of others and how we see them it is able to create new relationships based on love and not on comparison.

Our world today is strained by many tensions, our families and communities are marked by divisions and misunderstandings. As Christians and as members of the human family we have the choice between life and death. We can choose to celebrate life or to cultivate envy and jealousy; we can learn to rejoice in what is good, wherever we see it, or remain stuck in the mud of suspicion, mistrust and comparisons.

Why be envious while we can be alive?!