



Ambassadors of a

WORLDWIDE BROTHERHOOD

MEDITATION 3: THE WORKERS IN THE VINEYARD

- **LECTIO / READING: (MATTHEW 20: 1-16)**

THE WORKERS IN THE VINEYARD

1. “The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out at dawn to hire labourers for his vineyard.
2. After agreeing with them for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard.
3. Going out about nine o’clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace,
4. and he said to them, ‘You too go into my vineyard, and I will give you what is just.’
5. So they went off. [And] he went out again around noon, and around three o’clock, and did likewise.
6. Going out about five o’clock, he found others standing around, and said to them, ‘Why do you stand here idle all day?’
7. They answered, ‘Because no one has hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You too go into my vineyard.’
8. When it was evening the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, ‘Summon the labourers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and ending with the first.’
9. When those who had started about five o’clock came, each received the usual daily wage.
10. So when the first came, they thought that they would receive more, but each of them also got the usual wage.
11. And on receiving it they grumbled against the landowner,
12. saying, ‘These last ones worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us, who bore the day’s burden and the heat.’
13. He said to one of them in reply, ‘My friend, I am not cheating you. Did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage?’
14. Take what is yours and go. What if I wish to give this last one the same as you?
15. [Or] am I not free to do as I wish with my own money? Are you envious because I am generous?’
16. Thus, the last will be first, and the first will be last.”

Source: New American Bible, Oxford university Press, 1995

CONCEPTS:

Denarius: The denarius was one of the currencies used in the Middle East from the beginning of our era. A denarius was a normal day’s wage for a simple worker. It was not much, but enough to live on in a soberly manner for a day or two.

• MEDITATIO / EXPLANATION AND BACKGROUND TO THE TEXT

The parable Jesus tells us here seems at first glance to be simple and good to follow, even for listeners in the 21st century. A landowner needs extra manpower and goes out to hire people. Even though in many countries today you would no longer go to the main square, but to the temporary employment agency, the idea is clear. Day labourers were cheap and for you as an employer there were no further obligations. A slave you had to take care of in sickness and when he or she was unable to work, you were obliged to support him / her. A day labourer had to work for you for a day, and after that day you had no further obligations.

When the landowner arrives at the market he finds a couple of people who are in need of work and he enters into a labour contract with them. He will pay them 1 denarius.

Is that a reasonable fee for a day's hard work in the vineyard? From other sources we know that 1 denarius was the usual wage for a day's work. We also know that you needed at least 200 denarii a year to survive. For one denarius you could buy at that time ten to twelve small loaves of bread. For 12 liters of grain you paid 3 to 4 denarii. A lamb also cost about the same. For the simplest garment you had put down 30 denarii and a bullock cost at least 100 denarii. *One* denarius may be the statutory wage for a day's labour, it is clear that the position of the day labourer was lousy.

The landowner goes with his hired labourers to the vineyard and puts them to work. At 9 o'clock, 12 o'clock, and 3 o'clock, he goes back to the marketplace and hires still more people. The labour contract with these workers is less precise: he will pay them what is fair. Why did the landowner go back to the marketplace again? Is he a bad manager and didn't he estimate how much work had to be done that day? The parable says nothing about a possible reason.

And then, at 5PM, the landowner returns to the marketplace again. He asks the people he finds there: "Why are you still here hanging around unemployed?". Why are these people not hired by somebody earlier time that day? Are they old or sick or have they stayed in bed until noon and so lost their chance? This question is also not answered by the parable; for the story it apparently does not matter. He also sends these people into his vineyard to work. At this point the story really gets strange: who's going to hire people for just *one* hour?

The strangest thing surely comes when the payment takes place and the reason given by the landowner for his system of reward. At 6 PM he called his supervisor and instructs him to pay the labourers each one denarius. He has to start with the people who have been working since 5 PM and to end up with people who normally began at the beginning of the day. To their utter amazement the people who worked from the first hour see that those who worked only *one* hour get now from the superintendent the entire day's wages. If the people who have worked only *one* hour get now the entire day's wages, what will they then receive? The expectations are high. What a disappointment when they only receive the agreed-upon denarius of the superintendent.

Quite understandably they want to redress the landowner: this is unfair, people who just work *one* hour get paid just as much as those who have toiled all day in the blazing sun. Very quietly the landowner answers: Friend, what really is the problem? I thought we had agreed that this day you would work for *one* denarius, a normal wage, and you've just received that denarius? There is little these workers can bring in against, but their sense of justice will likely continue to protest against this treatment. It may be true that *one* denarius was the deal, but when for *one* hour of work also *one* denarius is paid, then that same agreed-upon *one* denarius for twelve hours of work is no longer sufficient.

• CONTEMPLATIO / REFLECTION

Can we imagine that you simply pick up workers on the street corner or at a city square? This still may be the case at some places, but certainly not in the Netherlands. It is even stranger that you do that throughout the entire day. Why would you still make an effort to find workers for just the last couple of hours of the day? The beginning of the story makes it clear that something special is about to happen.

It is also strange what the owner of the vineyard does when the wages are being paid. He does not start with the first ones, who have worked all day, but with the last ones, who only worked in the vineyard for an hour. On purpose he turns the order around. The workers who were there first have to see what is about to happen now. The text states: 'those who had started about five o'clock came, each received the usual daily wage' (*one* denarius). The presence of just one hour was sufficient for the payment of one denarius. When the workers of the first hour saw this, they had to be pleased. If those who had worked only one hour received one denarius, how much then would they not receive? The workers of the first hour became increasingly disappointed as the payment progressed. The workers who started at 5 PM received *one* denarius, the workers who started at 3 PM got *one* denarius, and so it went. Would they too get just *one* single denarius? They most probably were getting themselves angry already.

And yes, indeed, the workers of the first hour did not get more than *one* denarius. When they had received their money, they went to the owner of the vineyard to complain. 'These last ones have worked for *one* hour, and they received the same as we who bore the day's burden and the heat.'

In our view, it is probably a completely legitimate reaction. Surely is it unfair what happens here? However, the owner of the vineyard has a different perspective and replied: 'Friend, I am not doing you any injustice. Did we not agree on one denarius? I wish to give these last ones the same as you'. That's true. If we look at the situation again, no wrong has been done, and yet it pinches. Does our jealous attitude perhaps come to the fore? We receive what we deserve, and yet we are dissatisfied. Why is it so hard to accept that in comparison the other one gets more money?

When we think about these workers of the last hour, we ask ourselves who are they? Why at the end of the day were they still without work? Viciously thinking we might think that they are lazy people, who quickly want to earn a little more. But maybe they are people nobody wanted to hire, people who could not work well, who are to employers more a burden than a help. Anyway this landowner still takes them and he rewards them with even more than is fair.

The story makes us think. How do we deal with justice ourselves? Is it only when it is for our good? How important is the other person to us? Can we really be generous to somebody else? Can we accept the fact that someone else does something good for others that we did not see ourselves? The owner of the vineyard literally asks: "Are you envious because I am generous?"

The story is not a history, but a parable. "The kingdom of heaven is *like* a landowner who..." The story shows us how God really wants the world to be. In that world it's about *more* than justice. God, in the person of this landowner, is incredibly merciful. He will ensure that everyone gets what he needs, and not just what is his right. We are not accustomed to that. We are taken aback and get irritated at first. Only in the second instance we realize how special and how beautiful this is. Mercy and justice are not the same. Mercy goes beyond justice. Injustice is always merciless, but not all justice is therefore also merciful.

We also can read the parable in a different way. Then the vineyard is our way towards the Kingdom of God. Therefore, even if at the last minute you choose to go the way of the Kingdom of God, you are still equally welcome to God. And if you walk up front, you do not automatically have an edge over the others. The last shall be first and the first shall be last. That is a message of hope we find throughout the Gospel. Those who repent will be saved. Jesus did not come to heal the healthy ones, but sinners. God has mercy towards everyone who turns to him and forgives him, even at the last moment like with one of the two criminals who are crucified with Jesus. That too is God's incredible mercy.

Notes:

- **COLLATIO / SHARING**

Discuss in small groups the following questions:

- In the parable it seems that initially injustice is done to the workers that worked all day. In the end it turns out that that is not the case. Nevertheless, there is a lot of injustice in our world. What kinds of injustice do you see taking place in your area? How do you react to that?

- In the long run justice is being done to the workers that worked all day. The workers who started later would possibly not have the *right* to the same amount, nevertheless, it is a merciful act. Think about examples in which mercy goes beyond justice. Has that ever happened to you? Do you know people for whom it is necessary that more happens than what is just?

- At the end the landowner says: "Are you envious because I am generous?" That is really a confronting statement. When are you jealous? Do you always give the other one the very best? Can you mention situations in which you were jealous of another person while in reality you did not lack anything?

- In the contemplatio there are two ways in which one can look at mercy in the parable: God is merciful because he grants everyone the same; God is merciful because anyone who comes to him he will accept, sooner or later. Which way of looking at this appeals to you the most, and why?

- **ORATIO / PRAYER**

Invite someone of your group to close the sharing with a prayer. You also can pray the psalm below.

Psalm 86: 1-7,15-17

Incline your ear, LORD, and answer me,
for I am poor and oppressed.

 Preserve my life, for I am devoted;
 save your servant who trusts in you.

You are my God; be gracious to me, Lord;
to you I call all the day.

 Gladden the soul of your servant;
 to you, Lord, I lift up my soul.

Lord, you are good and forgiving,
most merciful to all who call on you.

 LORD, hear my prayer;
 listen to my cry for help.

On the day of my distress I call to you,
for you will answer me.

 But you, Lord, are a compassionate and gracious God,
 slow to anger, abounding in mercy and truth.

Turn to me, be gracious to me;
give your strength to your servant;
 save the son of your handmaid.

Give me a sign of your favor:
make my enemies see, to their confusion,
that you, LORD, help and comfort me.

- **CREATIO / CREATIVE ASSIGNMENT**

- Materials that are needed: old magazines, large sheets of paper, scissors, glue, drawing and writing materials
- You will be working in pairs. Discuss with each other in what way workers are being dealt with in your city or country. What is the unemployment rate, is there exploitation, discrimination? Discuss also the things that are going well. What rights do labourers have? Are there examples of good employers?
- Make a collage, possibly complemented with drawings and words in which you can demonstrate to others what the situation regarding work is in your city or country.
- Present your collage to the entire group and take a picture or make a video and share that with the other Ambassadors via [facebook.com/AmbassadorsWWB](https://www.facebook.com/AmbassadorsWWB)

- **OPERATIO / ACTION**

Think about something you can do in the near future for someone who needs it. Preferably something that is a surprise to the other one, something that he or she does not expect at all.
