

How many of us know someone like Victoria Quade? Even though she has a master's degree in Education, Victoria (see picture below) is one of many who have to rely on Government assistance. Despite her best efforts to get any work she can find, the stigma that too many of us still attach to beneficiaries has made her feel "ashamed". But with 40,000 more Kiwis now accessing benefits due to COVID (the number is estimated to grow to up to 300,000), Victoria hopes that attitudes will change (Zoe Madden-Smith, *New Zealanders seem to hate beneficiaries. Is there hope that Covid will change that?* renews.co.nz, 21st May 2020). To help people like Victoria is part of our social contract, the price we all have to pay for the sake of living in a decent and humane society. As good Pope St John XXIII wrote in his landmark 1962 letter to the world entitled *Pacem In Terris* (Peace on Earth): "...every person has the right to life, to bodily integrity, and to the means which are suitable for the proper development of life; these are primarily food, clothing, shelter, rest, medical care, and finally the necessary social services. Therefore a human being also has the right to security in cases of sickness, inability to work, widowhood, old age, unemployment, or in any other case in which one is deprived of the means of subsistence through no fault of one's own."

In this morning's Gospel, Jesus' confronting parable of workers in a vineyard shows us that we are all beneficiaries of God's Kingdom. Here, Jesus likens the Kingdom of Heaven to a vineyard owner who goes out at five different times of the day to hire workers to gather in his produce. As a good employer he promises to pay them "the usual daily wage" one denarius, a single silver coin that was enough to support a family for a day. But here's where things get interesting! Those brought in to work at 5.00pm are paid first and get precisely the same wage as those who started at dawn - who naturally expected to be paid more for bearing the greater burden of work in all the heat. No wonder the early birds get disgruntled with the boss and so would we for that matter! But the attitude of the landowner is in fact a real example of genuine social concern pre-dating the modern welfare state. In a predominantly rural society that relied mainly on casual and seasonal workers (where there were no such things as social welfare benefits or COVID-style wage subsidies) a single denarius literally spelt the difference between making ends meet and going hungry. The latecomers

were not “idlers”. They really did want to work. It was just that nobody else had noticed them standing in the marketplace. What right do the grumblers have to be jealous if their employer chooses to be generous with his resources? By deliberately turning the tables on those who felt entitled to getting more for doing more, Jesus was probably aiming an ever so subtle dig at those who disapproved of his association with the social outcasts of his own day – the “tax collectors and sinners” - who were looked down on even more than beneficiaries are today. Jesus most likely aimed his words at the Scribes and Pharisees who were certainly not on the same wavelength as Isaiah in our first reading; whose praise of God’s mercy anticipates the coming of Jesus himself, as the generosity of God made visible. Jesus’ parable “...*dramatically reinforces the sense of a God desirous to be as generous as possible with the gift of salvation, continuing in this way the sense of divine “goodness” that underpinned Jesus’ interaction with the young man (Matthew 19:16-22). In the long run God gives salvation as an unmerited free gift. Whether human beings have “worked” long or little for it is not ultimately decisive (Brendan Byrne sj, *Lifting the Burden: Reading Matthew’s Gospel in the Church Today*, Strathfield, NSW: St Pauls Publications, 2004, pp 153-155).*”

Of course, this does not give us a free pass to simply bludge off others without contributing to our community as responsible and productive citizens. In our second reading Paul writes to the Philippians that even though he would prefer to be “with the Lord” through death he is more than happy to continue living “in the flesh” if it means being able to carry on his “fruitful labour” on their behalf (Philippians 1:22-24). Apart from its material rewards, productive work of any kind confers on us the dignity of being co-workers with God in the “vineyard” of the Kingdom. Depending on what we “do” for a living, the vineyard in our Gospel comes in many modern forms. How can we apply the values of the Gospel to our concrete circumstances? How can we use the lessons of COVID to work for the reign of God as Paul would have us do, to achieve complete union with Christ even in the face of life’s present uncertainties? In the light of the Gospel genuine success depends not on earning God’s love through our own efforts or on having more of the earth’s resources at the expense of those who are most vulnerable, but on changing our basic attitudes, values and understanding of how the world can work. It is never too late for us

to join Jesus in harvesting the kingdom's fruits of justice and inclusion for the Victoria Quades of this world - where the first shall be last and the last shall be first....



Victoria Quade

Me nga manaakitanga ki te katoa e te whanau pariha
(With Blessings to All in our Parish Family), Stay Safe, Fr. James