

In Our Lord's time Judaism was very legalistic, and taught that salvation had to be earned. There were many commands which must be fulfilled, and people were divided into two classes, the righteous who were on the road to salvation by obeying all the rules and the unrighteous, outcasts despised by those who kept the law. Jesus opposed this way of looking at things by his emphasis on love, for in love there is no calculation of duties, rights and obligations; there is only an open-handed giving without counting the cost, and a grateful receiving.

The parable of the vineyard-workers is no blueprint for how labour relations ought to be, but it illustrates Jesus' teaching about grace and mercy and how generous and extravagant our God is. Here are good and fragile people doing their best, wondering why some got more for doing less. What we and the workers forget is that God is not like us. As the word of God came to Isaiah: "*My thoughts are not your thoughts.*" He is better and more loving than we can imagine being. God looks at the workers and says, "I love you regardless of what time you showed up for work, I'm just glad you showed up."

It is a reminder that we need to be grateful for help in the work God has given us to do, regardless of what time that help arrives. The work is often about being a sign of love to the world, and finding ways to love others even if they don't agree with us, look like us, or behave the way we want them to... or show up first thing in the morning for work.

To be hired late in the day and get less than a day's wage means belt-tightening for the entire family. Not to mention what it does to one's sense of self-worth to be overlooked or passed by when the hiring is being done.

To not be chosen to work creates anxiety, and the anxiety of going home empty handed becomes increasingly intense as each hour passes by. Is labouring through the heat of the day any worse than having one's hope of a meal for the family fade away as the sun begins to set in the western sky?

The lesson in today's gospel reading is one of extraordinary generosity and fairness. Everyone got a day's wage. Everyone could go home and feed the family. Just as it was with the manna in the desert, everyone got enough, no one got too much, nothing was left over.

The good news is that God's grace is so great and so surprising that it can provide enough no matter how late in the day it is – on the deathbed, in the jail cell, after repeated failures – because the recipient need not add anything to the grace, but simply receive it in order for it to do its life-sustaining work. It is never too late to accept God's Amazing Grace.

One of the best ways we can be signs of love in the world is to say thank you. Gratitude is an expression of love. When someone does something kind for us, regardless of whether they had to or not, it is a reminder of the goodness in them meeting the goodness in us—and the natural response to kindness is gratitude. Gratitude is extraordinarily important because it is a way for us to remember the goodness in others and ourselves—but still, it is easy to forget to be grateful.

I am reminded of a story!

A travel agent looked up from his desk to see an older lady and an older gentleman peering in the shop window at the posters showing the glamorous destinations around the world.

The agent had had a good week and the dejected couple looking in the window gave him a rare feeling of generosity. He called them into his shop and said, *"I know that on your pension you could never hope to have a holiday, so I am sending you off to a fabulous resort at my expense, and I won't take no for an answer."* He took them inside and asked his secretary to write two flight tickets and book a room in a five-star hotel.

They, as expected, gladly accepted the offer, and were on their way.

About a month later the little lady came in to his shop. "And how did you like your holiday?" he asked eagerly. "The flight was exciting and the room was lovely," she said. "I've come to thank you. But, one thing puzzled me.

"Who was that old guy I had to share the room with?"

The journalist and author Anne Herbert coined the phrase *"Random acts of kindness and senseless acts of beauty"*, basing it on the all-too-commonly used *"random acts of violence and senseless acts of cruelty."*

In her book on the subject, she encourages people to spread her vision of "guerrilla goodness." *"Anything you think there should be more of,"* she

says, *"do it randomly. Kindness can build on itself as much as violence can."*

You can see this principle at work in the bible story of Ruth, the emigrant from Moab. She was a foreigner, living in a strange land whose language and culture she did not understand. Furthermore, she was desperately poor, utterly dependent on the charity of a people who took little notice of her.

There was one Israelite, however, who showed Ruth grace and spoke to her heart. He allowed her to glean in his fields, but more than simple charity, he showed her by his compassion the tender mercy of God, under whose wings she could take refuge. She became Boaz's bride, part of the family of God, and one in a line of ancestors that led to Jesus, who brought salvation to the world! We never know what one act of kindness, done in God's name, will do.

The command to be kind to others is embedded in the Law that God gave to the Jews fresh out of Egypt. God told them, "Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against anyone among your people, but love your neighbour as yourself. I am the Lord". St Paul writes that Christ-followers are to "be kind and compassionate to one another". We are to show kindness because of who God is and what He has done for us. We are to "follow God's example, . . . and walk in the way of love".

But in our frailty, we are far from being kind to each other, and in fact our attitudes can be quite ruthless.

The theologian Professor Christine Pohl in her book *Living into Community: Cultivating Practices That Sustain Us*, writes:
Ruthlessness is not the only expression of evil that we might contrast with kindness, but it is one that plagues us. It comes in various forms and at multiple levels of destructiveness. Practices of warfare that include humiliation, rape, and targeting of children are so inhumane and heartless as to defy comprehension. Anyone who has dealt with middle-school bullying knows about the social power and personal consequences of focused, crushing meanness.

She points to the disrespectful nature of political campaigners and commentator and the general attitude of trampling on others to get things done quickly and writes: *“Ruthlessness involves a strategic form of self-centered heartlessness, a total disregard for persons who block our personal goals or broader commitments.”*

People of faith, she says, have their own versions of ruthlessness usually cloaked in something good because ruthless behaviour, in its raw form, so obviously contradicts the gospel. In what she calls *the heat of battle*, they justify their unkind words or harsh actions because they are for the sake of the kingdom, or the good of the church.

We usually recognize both ruthlessness and kindness when we see or experience them. In the presence of ruthless behavior, we are wary and defensive; when we encounter kindness, we feel sufficiently safe to lay down our weapons. While ruthlessness leaves a trail of destruction, a truly kind person is able to find beauty and goodness amid ashes.

Scripture constantly lists kindness among the characteristics of those who have been made new by the transforming power of Jesus through the Spirit. Kindness is an expression of the new life, the new self and the new creation, empowered by the kindness of God.

Kindness involves a recognition of our common humanity and frailty that leads us to care about each person's well-being and to treat others as worthy of love, generosity and respect.

Kindness is a posture of life that characterizes the people of God. In our words, conduct, debates and decisions, our kindness offers a glimpse of the Kingdom of Heaven.

Oh, that it should be so!