

# 25<sup>th</sup> SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME YEAR A 2020

Isaiah 55:6-9    Philippians 1:20-24,27    Matthew 20:1-16

*Reflection*

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## SCRIPTURE NOTE

***First Reading (Is 55:6-9).*** Here the prophet insists that evildoers must abandon their evil ways, and seek the Lord with humility. If they do, then God, who is rich in forgiveness, will take pity on them. God's ways are as high above our ways as the heavens are above the earth. Just how vast is the difference between God's ways and our ways is illustrated in the parable of the labourers in the vineyard.

***Gospel (Mt 20:1-16).*** The Pharisees were very critical of Jesus because of the way he befriended sinners and outcasts. By means of this parable Jesus tells them that he is only imitating God, who is generous to, and full of compassion for, the poor and the outcasts. The owner of the vineyard is God. The Pharisees were meant to see themselves in the workers who came in early. The latercomers were sinners and outcasts. Just as the owner of the vineyard was generous towards the latecomers, so God is generous towards sinners with his forgiveness and mercy. In this respect the parable is similar to that of the Prodigal Son. It illustrates that God's gracious giving is not determined by what is earned – a Matthean example of a major Pauline emphasis.

***Second Reading (Phi 1:20-24,27).*** For this and the next three Sundays the Second Reading is taken from Paul's letter to the Philippians. The present lines were written from prison where Paul faced an uncertain future. Here he speaks of death. However, he doesn't regard death in a morbid way. Rather, he sees it as a way of achieving complete union with Christ, something he longs for. Still, he would be more than happy to continue living, as it would mean carrying on his work on behalf of the Philippians. Paul exhibits precisely the kind of attitude envisaged in Jesus' parable. Rewards are not denied, but they are not the reason why we work in the Lord's vineyard.

## REFLECTION

In the Gospel of this weekend, Jesus tells his listeners that the kingdom of heaven is like a vineyard owner who went out several times during the day to hire workers for his vineyard. He promises those he hires first that he will pay them the usual daily wage. He goes out at mid-morning, noon, and mid-afternoon, and sends other labourers into

his vineyard with the promise that he pay them whatever is fair. At the end of the day, the owner begins by paying the last ones hired and gives them the same daily wage as those hired earlier in the day. When those hired first come to receive their wage, they expect more, and they grumble when they receive only the daily wage. The owner, however, believes he is being fair to those who worked all day and generous to those who worked only a few hours. The message reminds us that the kingdom of heaven is a gift that we do not merit no matter how long we work for it. The gift of the kingdom comes from the generosity of God.

The addition of the statement that the first shall be last and the last shall be first adds a new dimension to the story. Matthew could be addressing the people of his own day who were trying to understand how the Gentiles received so many of the gifts of Christianity while the Jews missed the coming of the Messiah. The fact that the Jewish nation had all those centuries of preparation did not guarantee they would automatically recognize the Messiah when he came. Even though the Gentiles come to understand the message of the kingdom late in creation, they still gain the fullness of the gift of the kingdom of heaven.

Dear sisters and brothers, in God's generosity, the good thief who repented at the last hour of his life could have as high a place in God's eternal glory as Saint Peter. What seems unfair to us is fair to God, and we should rejoice that all our brothers and sisters in our human family have an opportunity to share in God's glory, even if they worked at it for a shorter time than we did.

Our natural reaction to this parable is that those who worked the longest should have gotten paid the most. The Lord, however, gives us this parable not to teach about justice but about God's call and our response. We can examine this story on two levels, the historical level and the personal level.

First, there is the historical background. Through this story, the Lord explains why the Gentiles were entering the kingdom and experiencing the forgiveness and grace of God. They were offered salvation and redemption as much as were the Jewish people who struggled to stay faithful to the covenant for centuries. The Jewish people were the ones, of course, who worked from the morning hours. The Gentiles were the latecomers. The Lord teaches us that God's goodness and generosity invite all people to life in His presence. What is important in the parable is not how long they worked but that they answered the call when it came.

Some consider the story of the workers in the vineyard an unfair story. Justice is very important. To realize how important it is, all we have to do is think of its opposite. Anyone who had the experience of being treated unjustly will know what a deep hurt it can cause. Justice is to society what leaven is to bread. However, the story is not

about justice. It is about generosity. Justice is a great thing, but it hasn't the sweetness of generosity. Generosity touches the heart in a way justice never does. Though the story is about generosity, it is not about human generosity. It is about the generosity of God. God's generosity utterly transcends human generosity. *'My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are my ways your ways. As high as the heavens are above the earth, so high are my ways above your ways, my thoughts above your thoughts'* (First Reading).

To be more specific, the story is about God's generosity to sinners. The vineyard was the kingdom of God. Those who had been working all day long were the Pharisees and the Jews in general. They were meant to see themselves in the workers who came in early. The latecomers, the eleventh-hour people were sinners, the outcasts and the Gentiles.

The owner of the vineyard is God. Just as the owner of the vineyard was generous towards the latecomers, so God is generous towards sinners with his forgiveness and mercy. God's generosity is a great comfort to us, but it is also a great challenge. If we have experienced that generosity in our own lives, far from begrudging it to others, we will try to imitate it in our dealings with others.

If one is into worthiness and rewards, Jesus' parable is likely to make one no sense. But the story is not about justice. Thank heavens for that. Jesus' story is about generosity. However, it is not about human generosity, but the generosity of God.

We can also apply this parable to ourselves. First, it shows that people are called to Christ at different times in their lives. Some are baptized in the "morning" as babies. Others experience a call from the Lord in their teenage years, in "mid-morning," in "mid-afternoon" as adults, or even in the "evening" as senior citizens. At any age we can be drawn to Christ or called closer to Christ. God calls people at any hour of their life.

Secondly, notice that the owner in the parable did not compare one group of workers with another. They were all paid because they answered the call. The same is true with us. The Lord doesn't compare us with each other. Each of us has a unique combination of talents, challenges and opportunities in life. The problems and opportunities may be the same as that of others but the combination is always unique. The mix of burdens and graces we experience are never exactly identical to anyone else's. As Pope John Paul II wrote many years ago, "Each of us has a story of our life that is our own; and each of us has a story of our soul that is our own."

What the Lord asks of us is that we follow Him with whatever we have and as best we can. We should not look at how the person next to us answers the call.

Thirdly, each of the times of our life, the morning of our life, the noontime of our life, the midafternoon and the later afternoon enables us to bring a special strength to our work in the Lord's vineyard.

When we are young and in our teen years, we bring questions, enthusiasm, inquiry, imagination and energy to the vineyard. In early adulthood, when we are establishing ourselves in the world with a family job and profession, we bring competence and ability to the vineyard as we take the light of Christ beyond our family and friends to our workplace. Our middle years, mid-life, is the time of the second look. For many, it's a time of reappraisal. We start to see through the illusions of our society. It's a time to refocus, to stabilize our life, to drop off the excesses and focus on what is important. What we bring to the vineyard in the late afternoon is judgment, maturity, and focus.

Finally, in our senior years, we bring wisdom and tolerance. As we get older, friendships become more important and we are more at peace with ourselves. It's a time of candor, honesty and contemplation as we gather the experiences of a lifetime and appreciate the grace and goodness of the Lord that we may have missed before.

Each season of life has its own gift to bring to the vineyard. Some senior may not bring much energy but they have the gift of wisdom. The young may not be seasoned by experience but they have vitality and drive as the Book of Proverbs writes, "*The glory of a young man is his strength; the glory of an old man is his experience.*" The vineyard needs both.

This parable is not just about Jew and Gentile, not only about the different times when people find the Lord, not only about the uniqueness of our call. It is also about the seasons of life. Whatever our age, we all bring strengths and gifts to the vineyard. At each hour of the day and at each season of our life, the Lord is calling with a place for us and work for us in His vineyard.

The lesson which all of us should learn is to rejoice in the Lord's goodness. Some people can't bear to see others get things easier than themselves. For example, the people taken on at 6 am were happy to get work, satisfied with the wage, and thankful to the boss. But when they saw others being taken on later, and being promised the same wage, they began to grow resentful. The result was that what had been a sweet service turned sour, what had been a labour of love to turn into one of resentment.

In the Gospel this weekend, Jesus teaches us about the Kingdom of God. God will continue to invite us over and over throughout our whole life. God never tires of asking us: "*Will you come and work in my vineyard?*" We can't really believe that God is so good because we ourselves are often not so good. But God is not a

human being! God is God and has his own ways and His own thoughts. God loves us eternally and is always willing to forgive us and to show us mercy.

Dear sisters and brothers, we, Christians, should remember this term, *'The last shall be the first.'* Some people consider the story of the workers in the vineyard an unfair story, because it seems to favour the idler over the hard worker. The key to understanding the story is in the phrase, *'Are you envious because I am generous?'* The story is not about justice. It is about generosity, a generosity unlike anything we've ever known – the generosity of God. God is generous to a degree that far outstrips human generosity. All we have to do is open our hearts to God's generosity. And having experienced it, let it serve as a model for our dealings with others.

We are invited this week to know more about how God loves us and then to live that same kind of love with one another. Truly it is the only way to salvation and the only way that our world will ever come to live in peace. Let us walk with Jesus and live as He lived. Amen.

***Fr Tao Pham***