

Twenty Fifth Sunday of the Year September 24, 2017

Isaiah 55:6-9 Philippians 1:20-24.27 Matthew 20:1-16

A major theme that is running through the whole of the Old and New Testaments is that of 'justice'. God is wholly just and we are called, both individually and corporately, to lives of justice. The Readings of today refer to how much the God's wisdom surpasses our human categories of value and judgment. We experience a desire for God and for communion with others. Human nature has the wonderful capacity to love and to put its necessary self-affirmation at the service of God in communion with others. We also experience within ourselves a profound, but not fatal, distortion of these faculties that exaggerates and distracts these tendencies and inclinations from their true measure and purpose. Each person experiences in a unique way this inner tension and ruptures and experiences, on the one hand, the conflict between fundamental desires for love and justice, and, on the other, the practical difficulty of acting as we would ideally desire. In the first reading prophet Isaiah exhorts his people to search actively for the Lord. He reminds his people that the Lord's ways are not obvious to us, and need to be sought while we have the opportunity. Paul in the second reading shows us the spirit of true Christian service. He would prefer to be with Christ, but he knows that his present work in the vineyard "is more necessary for your benefit". He says that for him, to live is Christ and to die is gain. Matthew's Gospel presents us with a parable that demonstrates to us the difference between our spontaneous judgments and God's ways. If we do more, like the early laborers in the vineyard, our natural reaction is to claim more for ourselves than the latecomers who do less. The parable reminds us that service in God's vineyard is selfless. It is God's will and wisdom to save all who want to work, and that should also be our intention.

In the first reading from the Book of Isaiah we heard of the Divine calling of the Lord God. The Lord says: let the wicked forsake their way. Let the unrighteous forsake their thoughts. Return to the Lord and seek the Lord while He may be found. Call upon Him while He is near. The prophet urges the chosen people to seek Yahweh and come close to him in friendship. To do this the people of Israel were asked to abandon their evil ways. They do not have any fear because God is rich in forgiving and he will forgive sins of a repentant sinner. He is an infinite and transcendent God, yet he can and does come close to his people and remains a true friend to all those who seek him. He is a personal God who chooses to live

with his people. He is always near his people like a kind Father and a loving benefactor and is ready to give pardon, grace and friendship. Israel had already endured enough wickedness in its history. The failed policies of her leaders were fully illustrated by the prophet. King Ahaz and King Hezekiah had sought alliances from other nations instead of placing their total trust in the Lord, the God of Israel. They had gone away from God. Now God tells the people of Israel that if the sinner does not repent sins even the infinite God cannot show mercy to him. There were some among the chosen people who thought that their sins were so bad that God would not forgive them. The Lord says that this is not so, for his mercy, understanding and love are infinite. He tells that God is not like man, that he is infinitely superior and man has not the capacity to understand the working of God's mind. His thoughts are not like our thoughts and his way of acting is not like ours.

In today's Second Reading Paul reminds us that as Christians our whole life and our very death must be for Christ and in Christ. His very life which was dedicated to Christ is given as the model for the community to follow. As Christians we are expected to live our lives daily in the love and grace of God and Christ. As he was writing to the Philippians, Paul was in Prison in Rome and finds himself in a dilemma: to be with them or to face death both are preferable to him. Personally to depart and be with Christ is more preferable and it was necessary for him to remain on their account. The needs of those newly converted and the needs of those many yet to be converted make it necessary that he should continue to live and preach the Gospel. In this sense he speaks of the righteousness of man. It is to live and die for Christ. True righteousness is persevering in the profession of faith that one proclaimed during the Sacrament of Baptism. It is living with Christ, in Christ and through Christ, until one's last breath. Having done so, one will not be put to shame in any way because Christ will have been exalted in every action, in life or in death. Thus he advises the community that both living and dying in Christ is gain. If we live in Christ, we will receive the just reward that has been accredited to us for our charitable works by the grace of God the Father and the power of the Holy Spirit. If we die for Christ, we will immediately rejoice in the Divine Presence of our Lord. Our duty is to live according to the Gospel and thus earn the eternal salvation.

Jesus used many parables in his teaching, stories about everyday affairs, well known to his hearers, to bring out a spiritual message. The spiritual truth our Lord

wanted to teach all the Jews, but especially the Pharisees was that the life of eternal happiness is a sheer gift of God's generosity. It cannot be earned by any person independently. The fact that the Jews were a chosen race, the people of God was no guarantee that their future was assured. The fact that others, heathens and outsiders and hitherto sinners were no impediment to enter into heaven provided they turned to God and listened to Jesus. Today's Gospel is the parable of the workers in the vineyard, or rather, the hiring of workers for a vineyard. The parable is linked with the passage immediately preceding. There was the encounter with the rich man, who was a devout Jew invited by Jesus to be a disciple. He declined because he could not let go of his material wealth. There follow the warnings by Jesus about material wealth as a real obstacle to being part of God's Kingdom. The disciples, not yet fully convinced of this, still wonder what is in store for them as they have left all to follow Jesus. Jesus promises that they will have a very special place in his Kingdom and, even in this life, will be amply rewarded in having all their material and social needs fully met. And Jesus concludes by saying -- no doubt with the rich man and his disciples in mind -- "many that are first will be last and the last first".

When we see the following parable as related to the above its meaning becomes very clear. This parable is difficult for the many hard working people to hear. It challenges the sense of Justice and Fairness that most people in the working world hold to be sacred. Justice and Fairness mean a day's wage for a day's work. That principle does not seem to be upheld in this parable. The story describes the landowner hiring day laborers to work in his vineyard. We find the owner going out several times during a day to get workers and he makes an agreement with each one of them for a wage of one denarius. This was the normal daily wage for a worker in Jesus' time. The vineyard owner went out at six o'clock in the morning and again at nine, at noon and at three and five o'clock in the afternoon. It was normal for workers to gather at a crossroads or a market place waiting to be hired. Each time the vineyard owner assures the workers he will give them a "just wage". With just one hour of work time left, the owner went out once more. He sees men waiting there and asks them why they have been standing here idle all day. They respond saying that no one hired them. They were in fact idle the entire day, not because of laziness but because no one wanted to employ them. The parable in general seems to put a value on work and on the right to work. It says something about the curse of chronic employment bedeviling so many societies today.

Thus the landowner has five groups of workers laboring in his vineyard, each group of which was hired at different time. The normal presumption would be that at the end of the work day each group will receive a different amount of pay based on how long they worked. That would be justice and fairness. When the workday ended and pay was distributed, the usual order of first hired first paid was reversed. The foreman began with the last hired who only worked for a brief period. Starting with the last and arriving to the first each worker received the exact same pay of a usual day's wage. Technically this was not unjust because it was what all agreed to. Personally and practically however, this would have seemed unjust. Either those who were hired first should have been given more or those hired later should have received less. But it did not work that way. As a response to those who grumbled at the unequal treatment and payment of wages, the landowner claimed that he was not acting unjustly and that he is perfectly free to do as he wishes with his money. What some of the workers see as cheating, the land owner sees as an act of generosity.

The key of the parable then is the statement that the last will be first and the first will be last. In the kingdom of heaven justice and fairness do not follow worldly values. In the kingdom of heaven everything is done by grace and not by merit. The righteousness we have developed in the world will not bind God in the kingdom of heaven. We learn from the Gospel of today that God does not call everybody at the same time. Truly, the righteousness of the Lord is not the righteousness of man. The Lord God gives to those that He pleases in the amount that He chooses. He is free to do what he wants with what belongs to him, namely his grace. The Lord God is just and fair in all His dealings and no one will ever go unrewarded for his works that are accredited to him. Our work, if truly done for the love of God and for the salvation of others, is rewarded by the latecomers' entrance into the Kingdom. That is our wage. The fact that we are surprised by the Lord's generosity is a sign of our meanness of spirit and self-centeredness, which cloud our judgment from discovering the Lord's ways.

There is an important lesson here about God's justice. When seen from our often mathematical and narrow-minded viewpoint it often looks like injustice. We tend to think that if a person can do more, he is a better person and should have a greater reward. Why, for instance, is there such a disparity between the income of a doctor, a lawyer, a teacher, and a bus driver? Which of these, in fact, really does more work, we are not sure; yet they do not receive uniform reward. We

even think that if we do more for God, he will somehow love us more and reward us more. That is very much at the background of today's parable. For many of us, the workers were quite right to criticize their employer. They worked longer hours and should have got more money. But we need to realize that there is another way of looking at the situation. First, by doing more for God and for others does not mean that God will love us more. No matter what we do or do not do he cannot love us more than he already does. Second, God does not look at how much we do. He looks at our needs. He is already aware what exactly we need and the grace necessary to permit us to enter into the kingdom.

Today's parable teaches us that nothing God gives to us is due to us. Everything he gives us is from his free bounty and we cannot possibly earn it or deserve it. What God gives us not pay but gift and God is generous to us all. We cannot be envious or jealous because God is generous to someone else. His divine freedom sometimes sets aside our human expectations in a display those results in a God of surprises. Today's parable also tells us of the tender compassion of God. A person out of work is a tragic figure and all the late comers wanted some opportunity to work and God out of his generosity gives it. As a master he pays them more than they deserve as if to serve the cause of unemployment. We experience his loving generosity.

We experience a desire for God and for communion with others. Human nature has the wonderful capacity to love and to put its necessary self-affirmation at the service of God in communion with others. We also experience within ourselves a profound, but not fatal, distortion of these faculties that exaggerates and distracts these tendencies and inclinations from their true measure and purpose. Each person experiences in a unique way this inner tension and ruptures and experiences, on the one hand, the conflict between fundamental desires for love and justice, and, on the other, the practical difficulty of acting as we would ideally desire. This double truth of human nature (man created in the image and likeness of God, and the individual consequences of original sin) is fundamental to our understanding of the human person. This explains, among other things, the difficulty we have, as shown in St. Matthew's Gospel, of understanding and accepting the criterion of love when it affects our immediate interests.

A nurse took the tired, anxious serviceman to the bedside. "Your son is here," she said to the old man. She had to repeat the words several times before the

patient's eyes opened. Heavily sedated because of the pain of his heart attack, he dimly saw the young uniformed Marine standing outside the oxygen tent. He reached out his hand. The Marine wrapped his toughened fingers around the old man's limp ones, squeezing a message of love and encouragement. The nurse brought a chair so that the Marine could sit beside the bed. All through the night the Young Marine sat there in the poorly lighted ward, holding the old man's hand and offering him words of love and strength. Occasionally, the nurse suggested that the Marine move away and rest awhile. He refused. Whenever the nurse came into the ward, the Marine was oblivious of her and of the night noises of the hospital - the clanking of the oxygen tank, the laughter of the night staff members exchanging greetings, the cries and moans of the other patients. Now and then she heard him say a few gentle words. The dying man said nothing, only held tightly to his son all through the night. Along towards dawn, the old man died. The Marine released the now lifeless hand he had been holding and went to tell the nurse. While she did what she had to do, he waited. Finally, she returned. She started to offer words of sympathy, but the Marine interrupted her. "Who was that man?" he asked. The nurse was startled, "He was your father," she answered. "No, he wasn't," the Marine, replied. "I never saw him before in my life." "Then why didn't you say something when I took you to him?" "I knew right away there had been a mistake, but I also knew he needed his son, and his son just wasn't here. When I realized that he was too sick to tell whether or not I was his son, knowing how much he needed me, I stayed." The next time someone needs you ... Just be there. Stay.

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