

Sunday, Sept. 21, 2014

25<sup>th</sup> Sunday of the Year (A)

Conventual Mass

“Your Ways Are Not My Ways”

“My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord.” The parable of the workers in the vineyard is a good example of Jesus’ teaching. The parable tells a simple story; it shows ordinary people in everyday situations. The narrative provokes the hearer to take sides, to adopt the position of one of the persons or group in the narrative, to express the reactions to the circumstances described. These reactions allow Jesus to react in his turn. He then says, “You think so. Well, you are mistaken.” His hearers see themselves directly affected by his teaching. This is why, even when we know a parable by heart, it does not stop asking questions. Finally, the parables show us that Jesus knew how to announce the good news of salvation without ordinarily trying to offend his hearers, yet without in the least watering down the demands of the gospel.<sup>i</sup> Jesus was a master at the art.

This parable follows on the heels of the story of Jesus and the “young man” with “many possessions.” In calling the young man, Jesus asked him to sell his many possession, give the money to the poor and follow him. “When he heard this he went away sorrowful; for he had great possessions” (Mat 19:22). After Jesus commented how riches can be an obstacle to entering the kingdom, Peter, the businessman, raises a question. He and the other disciples have left everything to follow Jesus. Quite frankly, what is the payoff?<sup>ii</sup>

In apocalyptic language (“when the Son of man shall sit on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones” Mat 19:28), Jesus assures Peter and the disciples that God’s work will bring them to a happiness and fulfillment beyond human expectation. If Peter and the disciples are worrying about a poor payoff, Jesus assures them with a vision of glorious recompense. Peter’s attitude and the need for the assurance of a reward does not fit well with laboring in the Lord’s

vineyard. The parable of the workers in the vineyard tries to point out the problem and correct it.<sup>iii</sup>

The way in which the master of the vineyard orders payment of the workers is surprising. Normally we would not begin with the last and finish with the first. The latter, seeing that each of these late comers received a silver coin – the agreed upon wage for a whole day's work – could only expect to get at least four times as much. But no, the master gives them each one silver coin, in spite of their having borne the heat and work of the full day. "It's not fair. It's even scandalous to be treated in this way."<sup>iv</sup> And I dare say that in our hearts we agree.

Our picture of God is influenced in some way by how we ordinarily look at things and that is why, as we hear this gospel, we are tempted to react and share in the grumbling of the laborers who have worked in the vineyard since early morning. In human terms it does seem unfair that after working hard all day in the hot sun they got the same pay for their efforts as those who

were given work at five o'clock. After all, these last had been standing around idle all day.<sup>v</sup>

But this is a parable about the kingdom not social equality. We understand that. Yet it does not make us accept as evident the teaching of the parable. Other questions arise precisely because we are speaking of the kingdom of heaven. Did not God himself enjoined upon us the requirements of justice and the payment of a just salary when he gave human beings the Law? On the day of judgment will he exercise an arbitrary power based on his good pleasure? The words put in the mouth of the landowner show that these questions are not relevant.<sup>vi</sup>

By giving the workers the salary agreed upon, the master in no way wrongs the first-hired. In any case, they do not argue this point. But they grumble because those who were hired last are given as much as they. And this is why the master reproaches them, reminding them that they received what was due them. They are envious because the master is generous. Those who were called to the vineyard at dawn were hired because the

master is good. Through kindness, he offered them a silver coin for their work. Therefore, they should not only be grateful to him, but also be glad that others were called later and now receive the same pay. The parable of the laborers in the vineyard is to be seen in the same light as that of the prodigal son and his older brother (Luke 15:11-32). In both cases, Jesus condemns those who do not accept God's goodness or are unwilling to share it with others.<sup>vii</sup>

There is no room in the kingdom for the pursuit of a better salary. All we are and all that we have comes from God's generosity and not our own accomplishment. We are given a share in God's goods in God's very life out of God's sheer love for and generosity towards us. Our work in God's service – in the vineyard in which every Christian is engaged, arises out of our relationship to God which is one of love. "Everything I have is yours," says God to us (Luke 15:31). We can only be overwhelmed by such love and generosity and when others also benefit by it even at the last moment. Our labor in the

Landowner's vineyard long or short leads to a share in the life of  
God himself. God himself is the silver coin of payment.<sup>viii</sup>

i" Days of the Lord: The Liturgical Year, v.4, Ordinary Time, Year A (Collegeville, Minn, Liturgical Press, 1992) 196

ii" John Shea, The Spiritual Wisdom of the Gospels for Christian Preachers and Teachers, v. A (Collegeville, Minn, Liturgical Press, 2004) 279

iii" John Shea, 279

iv" Days of the Lord, 197

v" Desmond Knowles, Voicing a Thought on Sunday (Dublin, Columbia Press, 1991) 106

vi" Days of the Lord 197

vii" Days of the Lord 197

viii" Days of the Lord 198