

Twenty-Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A
Is 55:1, 6-9
Ps 145 *passim*
Phil 20c-24, 27a
Mt 20:1-16a

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St. Petronille Parish, Glen Ellyn
Sunday, September 20, 2020

At this 7:30 Mass, I feel especially comfortable quoting from the Baltimore Catechism. God made us to know him, love him, and serve him in this world, and to be happy with him forever in the next. God gave us a mission and a destiny: a mission to know, love, and serve him in this world, and a destiny: eternal happiness with him in the next life.

The human race was created in the image and likeness of God, the Book of Genesis tells us. Every human being reflects the image of God, but the likeness to God got distorted by original sin. Human nature got wounded by original sin, and in our woundedness we lost our natural capacity for eternal happiness with God. God became one of us to reveal the divine Self to us, to patch our woundedness, and to fix our broken world. The world as God intended it, the world untainted by sin, is what Jesus described as the Kingdom of heaven. And to help us understand the Kingdom of heaven, he told us stories. And his stories pack a punch; every story contains an insight that startles us, because, as God told Isaiah in today's first reading, God's ways are not our ways, God's thoughts are not our thoughts.

First, a little context. Today's Gospel reading falls at the beginning of chapter 20 of Matthew's Gospel. In chapter 19, just a few verses before, we see the rich young man walk away from Jesus sad, because he couldn't take up the challenge Jesus put to him. Watching him go, Jesus remarks to his disciples that it's easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven – BUT with God all things are possible. The parable Jesus then told, the one we're chewing on right now, shows a rich man who is on the right path.

As we hear the parables of Jesus and turn them over in our hearts, it is often worthwhile to situate ourselves within the framework of the story. This parable presents three characters (or sets of characters): the landowner, the foreman, and the laborers.

The translation used in the Lectionary calls him the landowner, but the original Greek word is, literally, master of the household. He owns the vineyard, sure, but he is the ruler of a whole household, of which the vineyard is just a part. Within that household, he answers to nobody; he is in charge.

The foreman is sometimes called the steward. He manages whatever portion of the household the master entrusts him with, and he does the master's bidding. He is a regular, long-term employee.

Not so with the laborers. They are day-laborers, at the mercy of the marketplace. Every day each of them has to hope that the owners and their hiring managers will pick them. Eventually, some of them become known as strong, steady, and productive workers; others, not so much.

When harvest time comes, and demand for workers is high, the owners and their hiring managers compete with each other for the best candidates, so in this case, the owner has gone to the hiring hall at dawn, and selected the workers he needed. He offered them the usual daily wage, and they agreed. But oddly enough, he kept going back to the hiring hall. He went back at 9 o'clock, noon, 3 o'clock, and again at 5 o'clock. Presumably, each successive group of laborers was less desirable than the one before, from a productivity standpoint. But in each case he sent the laborers into his vineyard and assured that he would pay them "what is just."

At the end of the 12-hour workday, he had the steward line them up in reverse order, starting with the bunch from 5 o'clock. And he had the steward pay them each the standard daily wage. This was done in full view of the earlier groups, and there's no indication that anybody objected until it dawned on the earliest groups that they were all getting paid the same. Huh. Humanly, their grumbling is understandable: "It don't seem right!"

Society operates by certain principles: "Fair is fair." "First come, first served." "An honest day's work for an honest day's pay." The Kingdom of heaven doesn't care about human conventions. "As high as the heavens are above the earth, so high are my ways above your ways," says the LORD, "and my thoughts above your thoughts."

Jesus taught his disciples to pray. At every Mass we pray the prayer he taught them. "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." We ask, among other things, "Give us this day our daily bread." Jesus doesn't tell us to pray for riches and power. He doesn't tell us to ask for what we deserve (or think we deserve). He asks us to pray for what we need to make it through the day. Before God we are all day-laborers. And before God we are none of us in competition. We are called to thank God for the blessings he has given us, and never ever to begrudge the blessings he has given others. In the words of the psalm, the LORD is generous; his mercy and lovingkindness are no cause for envy.

Sometimes and in some ways we find that we are stewards, employed to do another's bidding. We may have influence on the employer, but in the end if we're going to earn our paycheck (whether literally or metaphorically), we have to do what the employer tells us to do the way he or she tells us to do it.

But even then, each of us has certain areas of our lives and aspects of our lives where we are the householder, we are the one in charge. And in those areas and aspects especially, God calls us to think, as St. Paul told us, with the mind of Jesus. To the extent it is our vineyard and our money, Jesus tells us to be generous, to give in response to the needs of those around us, without judgment.

In the Gospel reading we heard four weeks ago, Simon acknowledged that Jesus is the Christ, the long-awaited anointed one of God, and Jesus dubbed him Peter the Rock. He gave him the keys to the kingdom of heaven and the authority to bind and to loose. Two weeks ago, in a totally different context, he told the community of the disciples that whatever they bind on earth shall be bound in heaven and whatever they loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. The first binding and loosing refers to the power of St. Peter and his successors, and of the bishops and priests in union with them, to lead and guide the Church. The second binding and loosing applies to the rest of us, and it's not, I think, so much a power as a mission. It is "binding" as we saw it in the parable of the Good Samaritan, who bound up the wounds of the man whom the robbers had left for dead. It is "loosing" as Jesus commanded his followers to do at the raising of Lazarus. Lazarus staggered out of the tomb all bound up with burial wrappings and Jesus said to set him loose.

"Thy kingdom come," we pray. The coming of the Kingdom of God that we pray for over and over is God's work, in God's hands. Jesus established his Church as the extension of his saving work through time and space, until the Kingdom of God comes to fruition. As we wait for the time of fulfillment our work is to bind the wounds of a broken world and to loosen the fetters of a world in bondage.

Whose wounds are you being called to bind? Whose fetters are you being called to loose?