

This Sunday's Readings – the 25th Sunday in Ordinary Time – Today's readings are as follows:

- Isaiah 55:6-9
- Psalm 145:2-3, 8-9, 17-18
- Philippians 1:20c-24, 27a
- Matthew 20:1-16a

The theme of today's readings is God's infinite generosity, forgiveness, and accessibility.

The first reading is taken from the Book of the prophet Isaiah. It is from chapter 55, the last chapter of what is referred to as 2nd Isaiah, which was written toward the end of the Babylonian Captivity. It is also called The Book of Consolation. The exiled Jews in Babylon are discouraged and despairing. They realize that it was their sins that caused the exile and the destruction of Jerusalem. But Yahweh has not forsaken them and that is the message of deuterio-Isaiah. "Seek the Lord while He may be found, call Him while He is near". This is not only a message of forgiveness but also a message that God is always near us. It is a message of hope which is both material and spiritual. They must maintain their faith in God. On the other hand, God works in strange ways. As deuterio-Isaiah states – "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord".

These words prepare us for the Gospel reading from Matthew. Here we have the famous parable of "The Workers in the Vineyard". This particular parable is unique to Matthew. There are no other references to it in any of the other Gospels. At first glance, this is a very disturbing parable, as well it should be. Let's take a closer look. First of all this is not a lesson in labor relations. It's harvest time and the landowner goes out to hire laborers to harvest the grapes in his vineyard. He hires the first group at 6:00 AM and agrees to pay them the standard wage. Remember last week's reading where we discovered that the standard wage was a denarius, which was a small silver coin. It was not the greatest wage but it was better than nothing. The landowner subsequently hires additional workers throughout the day with the last being hired at 5:00 PM. The landowner agreed to pay those laborers "what is just". At the end of the day, the landowner said to the foreman "Summon the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and ending with the first". Each laborer was paid the standard daily wage, a denarius. The laborers who were hired first were paid the same as the workers hired last, a very generous gesture by the landowner. However, the first laborers hired believed that they should have received a higher wage because they worked the entire day, but remember that they agreed to work for the standard daily wage. Reginald H. Fuller in his *Preaching the Lectionary: The Word of God for the Church Today* explains – "What Matthew means is that those who forsake all and follow Jesus, and who are therefore the first, may turn out to be the last. The parable of the laborers in the vineyard follows right upon this as a warning to the Christians in Matthew's Church not to hanker after rewards. Rewards are not denied, but they are not the purpose of toil for Christ and his kingdom. They always come as a surprise". Remember deuterio-Isaiah – "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord".

John J. Pilch in his *The Cultural World of Jesus, Sunday by Sunday, Cycle A* adds these comments on today's Gospel reading – "What is God like? The answer to this common question always reflects the culture of the questioner or the one who answers the question. Today's parable reports one of Jesus' many answers to this question. It should be no surprise that in this parable God behaves in accord with Middle Eastern values.

LIMITED GOOD

In general, Americans believe that "there is always more where this came from," whether it is oil, jobs, money, or whatever. This attitude makes it extremely difficult for Americans to understand concepts such as shortages, extinction, or anything similar. Our Mediterranean ancestors in the faith believed "there is no more where this came from." Everything (jobs, wealth, honor, or whatever one could imagine) was limited in quantity and already distributed. The jobs at the vineyard were already filled. How dare any worker think there might be more jobs? Moreover, to ask for a job is to deprive the employer of something he owns. This is shameful. Instead, workers have to be invited by the owner to work for him. The owner in this parable goes out five times in one day looking for workers to invite, and each time he hires everyone in sight. Such behavior by the owner and the potential workers is very honorable, because it respects the cultural idea that all goods—including jobs—are limited.

PATRONAGE

In America, workers look for jobs, employers hire the best qualified workers, they agree on a wage and respect a practice called "seniority." None of this existed in the ancient Mediterranean world and none of these elements can be found in the parable. Only to the first hired does the owner promise "the usual daily wage." They agree to accept it. To the second (and presumably all subsequent groups), the owner says: "I will pay you whatever is right?" At the end of the day, the owner pays the workers beginning with the last hired. This is an important narrative point without which the story would collapse because those hired first would have no reason to hang around if they were paid first. This point also indicated to ancient Mediterranean peoples that the owner wears two hats: he is an employer but can also be a patron. A patron is a person of means who freely chooses to treat other people (always of lower status) "as if" they were family members. No one can bid for or "earn" such treatment, but everyone in the Mediterranean world of antiquity and the present seeks to have a patron. The vineyard owner treats the last hired generously and graciously, "as if" they were relatives. They did nothing to "earn" such treatment. The owner gave them "what is right" for relatives. At the same time, the owner treats the first hired in accord with their agreement. If he chose to, the owner could disregard the agreement and treat the first hired generously, "as if" they were relatives. But he doesn't so choose. To the first hired, the vineyard owner chooses to be employer; to the last hired, the vineyard owner chooses to be a patron. Jesus' lesson is not about economics but about God from a Middle Eastern perspective. Insinuated in Jesus' explanation is that God's choice for treating people may reflect how people deal with God. Such ideas clash with American economic ideas of equal opportunity, contracts, seniority, and the like. How should God behave from an American perspective?"

Joe Juellich, Liturgy Team