

25th Sunday in Ordinary Time – Cycle A

Note: Where a Scripture text is underlined in the body of this discussion, it is recommended that the reader look up and read that passage.

1st Reading - Isaiah 55:6-9

We know very little about the details of Isaiah's life. To distinguish him from other men of the same name, he was called "Isaiah, the son of Amos;" later "Isaiah the prophet." According to Jewish tradition he was of royal stock. He was of the tribe of Judah and his home was in Jerusalem. All his discourses are addressed to the people, or to certain classes and individuals, or to the women of Jerusalem. He was married and had two sons. We know from Isaiah 8:3 that his wife was known as a prophetess.

Isaiah 40:1 through 55:13 has been called the Book of Comfort. The prophet places ancient traditions in a cosmic setting. The Mosaic covenant is expanded into a world covenant by mentioning the covenants with Noah and with Abraham and Sarah. The author sees the garden of paradise emerge before his eyes. The spirit of the liturgy breaks forth into new life through his hymns, laments, and proclamation of the word.

On the 18th Sunday in Ordinary Time in this cycle we heard the opening three verses of the conclusion to the Book of Comfort. Today we hear more of this opening.

⁶ Seek the LORD while he may be found, call him while he is near.

This phrase normally invited people to the sanctuary. Here, it encourages them to find the Lord elsewhere. This sounds a lot like Jeremiah 29:10-14.

⁷ Let the scoundrel forsake his way, and the wicked man his thoughts; Let him turn to the LORD for mercy; to our God, who is generous in forgiving. ⁸ For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD.

Man must seek God, and yet God's ways are far beyond comprehension.

⁹ As high as the heavens are above the earth, so high are my ways above your ways and my thoughts above your thoughts.

These closing lines combine those mysterious opposites of divine grace: God is transcendent, yet near enough to help; man is helpless yet required to act energetically; the ways of God are exalted, yet required of man.

2nd Reading - Philippians 1:20c-24, 27a

Philippi is a city north of the Aegean Sea named after Philip of Macedon, the father of Alexander the Great. Saint Paul founded the first Christian church in Europe at Philippi around the year 51, during his second missionary journey. Saint Paul lived in Philippi for some years and had special affection for these people, which they reciprocated. Acts 16:11-40 tells us that he suffered imprisonment and the lash on their account. The Philippians, for their part, sent Epaphroditus to Rome to look after Paul when he was imprisoned there. Epaphroditus, who was a great help at first, soon became seriously ill. Once he was on the way to recovery, Saint Paul sent him back home with a letter. This letter was written by Paul during his imprisonment in A.D. 61-63 and is addressed to the Philippians. In this letter Paul simply expresses his gratitude to the Father for all consolation, and to the Philippians for the kindness and attention they showed him and for never being a source of worry to him but rather of consolation.

In our reading today we hear Saint Paul describing his own situation.

20c Christ will be magnified

The power of the Risen Lord, operating through the Spirit in Paul, will be so effective as to demand public acknowledgment.

in my body,

Not just his physical body, but his entire outward presentation – his whole public appearance.

whether by life or by death.

Paul is talking about the gravity of his upcoming trial.

21 For to me life is Christ,

Through baptism Paul has died to his former life and now lives an existence entirely taken over by Christ; one that transcends the barrier of physical death.

and death is gain.

Not in the sense of release from bodily existence, but as an intensifying union with Christ, who has already passed through death to resurrection. Resurrection is the ultimate goal.

“It seems that for him death would be profitable and life would be more a penalty. For this reason Paul says ‘for me life is Christ, and death is gain.’ The death of the body is nothing amid the spirit of life. So we too are ready to die with Christ that we may live with Him.”

[Saint Ambrose of Milan (A.D. 378), *The Death of His Brother Satyrus* 2,40]

22 If I go on living in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me.

Remaining alive provides further opportunity for preaching the gospel and reaping its fruits.

And I do not know which I shall choose. 23 I am caught between the two. I long to depart this life and be with Christ, (for) that is far better.

To “be with the Lord” was Saint Paul’s expectation for the parousia – the end times. Now, due to the proximity of death, he realizes that another possibility exists. Paul now reckons with an intermediate state in which the deceased Christian is “with Christ” after death and before the resurrection.

24 Yet that I remain (in) the flesh is more necessary for your benefit.

Maintain his earthly life. The demands of apostleship override his desire to join Jesus as soon as possible.

“He admits that it might be much easier to be dissolved and be with Christ. But nonetheless he knows that it is necessary for him to remain in the flesh for the benefit of the faithful, so that their glory may abound in the Lord and all may praise the Lord when they see him again. They will thereby increase their knowledge and become more deeply grounded in faith. How great was his affection for the believers, that he does not choose what he says would be much better for himself. Rather he wants what is more profitable to many, in the assurance that what conduces to the benefit of many will also please the Lord.” [The Ambrosiaster (between A.D. 366-384), *Commentaries on Thirteen Pauline Epistles* Philippians 1:23]

27a Only, conduct yourselves

The original specific sense of the Greek is “discharge your duties as a citizen.”

in a way worthy of the gospel of Christ

Christian ethics flow from the status before God brought about through faith in the gospel.

“The summing up of one’s whole life for a Christian is this, to conduct oneself according to Christ’s gospel, to announce His grace steadily both to oneself and others, to have hope in Him, to do all that one does according to His commands. For this is what is means to ‘conduct yourselves in a way worthy of the gospel of Christ.’ A person can live honestly and uprightly, but this is not adequate to Paul’s meaning. Rather we are to conduct ourselves according to Christ’s gospel regardless of what happens and to do so in a worthy manner, living according to Christ’s precepts and doing what Christ wants.” [Marius Victorinus (ca. A.D. 355), *Epistle to the Philippians* 1,27]

Gospel - Matthew 20:1-16

Having heard for the past two weeks of Christian discipline and forgiveness as we study Matthew's gospel, we skip over Jesus' teaching on the indissolubility of marriage (which is heard in the Common of Virgins Mass), the Little Children and Jesus, and the story of the Rich Young Man. Before moving into today's reading, let's look for a minute at the teaching on divorce (Matthew 19:1-12):

19:1 When Jesus finished these words,

The parable of the unmerciful servant which we heard last week.

he left Galilee and went to the district of Judea across the Jordan. ² Great crowds followed him, and he cured them there. ³ Some Pharisees approached him, and tested him, saying, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any cause whatever?"

Notice where this takes place: Judea across the Jordan – the same place where John the Baptist was killed for condemning divorce. Knowing what had happened to John the Baptist, the Pharisees are setting a similar trap for Jesus.

⁴ He said in reply, "Have you not read that from the beginning the Creator 'made them male and female'

Genesis 1:27

⁵ and said, 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh'? ⁶ So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore, what God has joined together, no human being must separate."

When Jesus says "no human being must separate (put asunder)" he is talking about the husband, who could write the bill of divorce – not about outside influences.

⁷ They said to him, "Then why did Moses command that the man give the woman a bill of divorce and dismiss (her)?"

Deuteronomy 24:1

⁸ He said to them, "Because of the hardness of your hearts Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so.

Moses allowed it (Deuteronomy 24:1) so that the husband wouldn't kill his wife in order to be free to marry another. Hardness of heart is the phrase used by God to describe pharaoh in Exodus 4:21; 7:3; 10:1; and 14:4. "Blessed is the man who fears the LORD always; but he who hardens his heart will fall into calamity" (Proverbs 28:14)

⁹ I say to you, whoever divorces his wife (unless the marriage is unlawful) and marries another commits adultery.”

The exception clause “unless...” occurs only in Matthew’s gospel. Note where the exception is placed: even though divorce may be allowed in this case, remarriage is not; remarriage would be allowed only if the exception were placed after its mention. Some translations phrase the exception clause as “except for unfaithfulness” (NIV), “except it be for fornication” (KJV), “except for unchastity” (RSV) which helps to confuse the issue. The New Jerusalem Bible says “I am not speaking of an illicit marriage”. The Greek word translated here, *pornea*, was used most commonly during Jesus’ time to refer to a relationship with a concubine which, when ended, did not require a bill of divorce; hence the reference to illicit or unlawful marriage.

¹⁰ (His) disciples said to him, “If that is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry.” ¹¹ He answered, “Not all can accept (this) word, but only those to whom that is granted. ¹² Some are incapable of marriage because they were born so; some, because they were made so by others; some, because they have renounced marriage for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Whoever can accept this ought to accept it.”

Now, let’s move on to today’s gospel reading, the parable of the laborers in the vineyard.

[Jesus told his disciples this parable:] ^{20:1} “The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out at dawn to hire laborers for his vineyard.

Employers looked in gathering places in the city for workers; unemployed men who would work for as little as the employer would pay. Such places exist today in many U.S. cities.

² After agreeing with them for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard.

Remember, this is a parable. The vineyard is symbolic of God’s chosen people. As we learned in last week’s gospel reading, the usual daily wage is a denarius, a piece of silver. A normal daily wage; not stingy, but not generous either.

³ Going out about nine o’clock,

The boss hires at 6 a.m., 9 a.m., 12 noon, 3 p.m., and 5 p.m.

he saw others standing idle in the marketplace, ⁴ and he said to them, ‘You too go into my vineyard, and I will give you what is just.’

The wage is unspecified, but fair.

⁵ So they went off. (And) he went out again around noon, and around three o’clock, and did likewise. ⁶ Going out about five o’clock, he found others standing around, and said to them, ‘Why do you stand here idle all day?’ ⁷ They answered, ‘Because no one

has hired us.'

They are willing to work but remain unemployed – not to be confused with laziness. Work is more honorable than doing nothing.

He said to them, 'You too go into my vineyard.' ⁸ When it was evening the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, 'Summon the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and ending with the first.'

It now becomes obvious that this parable is about Jesus teaching to the apostles in Matthew 19:27-30.

⁹ When those who had started about five o'clock came, each received the usual daily wage.

A denarius

¹⁰ So when the first came, they thought that they would receive more, but each of them also got the usual wage. ¹¹ And on receiving it they grumbled against the landowner,

The early workers are the victims of rising expectations, hence their discontent. Grumbling is a characteristic of the Israelites.

¹² saying, 'These last ones worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us, who bore the day's burden and the heat.'

The wage is the same, yet it is not truly equal because of the boss' generosity. The boss has counted their willingness to work.

¹³ He said to one of them in reply, 'My friend, I am not cheating you. Did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? ¹⁴ Take what is yours and go.

This is the classic definition of justice: render to each his due.

What if I wish to give this last one the same as you? ¹⁵ (Or) am I not free to do as I wish with my own money?

The capitalist of the ancient world was master of his money.

Are you envious because I am generous?'

The laborers are rebuked not for their dissatisfaction with what they have received, but for their dissatisfaction in the fact that others have received as much. By giving to one, the employer has not taken away from another.

16 Thus, the last will be first, and the first will be last.”

This parable is addressed to the Jewish people, whom God called at an early hour, centuries ago. Now the Gentiles are also being called – with an equal right to form part of the new people of God, the Church. It is a matter of gratuitous, unmerited, invitation; therefore those who were first to receive the invitation have no grounds for complaint when God calls the “last” and gives them the same reward – membership in His family.

At first reading, the laborers who were first hired seem to have a genuine grievance – because they do not realize that to have a job in the Lord’s vineyard is a divine gift. Jesus leaves no doubt that although we may all come by different paths, we all receive the same reward – the kingdom of heaven.

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