

Sunday Readings



The owner of the vineyard said, 'Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you' (Mt. 20:14)

25th Sunday Ordinary Time
3rd Sunday of Season of Creation

25th SUNDAY ORDINARY TIME***the father's gratuitous love***¹**introduction**

In this *Season of Creation*, we are being called to take up our prophetic responsibility in love to transform the ways we are living upon the the Earth. As told by Jesus, the parable of *the Labourers in the Vineyard*,² addresses the resentments felt by those who had spent long years in faithful observance of the Torah, at the welcome and acceptance Jesus gave to those who appeared to come so late to any sense of conversion.³ The complaintants' assumption is that the LORD is a god who acts with strict justice. The parable throws up a totally different view of GOD, in whose name Jesus has issued the call to the kingdom. The parable is found only in Matthew, where Jesus tells about a landowner hiring labourers at a subsistence wage, at different hours of the day and paying each at day's end the same amount. Matthew introduces the parable by asserting that: *'the kingdom of heaven is like that'*.⁴

first reading: Isaiah 55 : 6 – 9

[an invitation to abundant life]

*Seek the LORD while he may be found,
call upon him while he is near;(6)
let the wicked forsake their way,
and the unrighteous their thoughts;
let them return to the LORD,
that he may have mercy on them,
and to our GOD, for he will abundantly pardon.(7)
For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD.(8)
For as the heavens are higher than the Earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts.(9)*

Isaiah reflects a hopeful reading of the Israelite people's situation. GOD is still committed to the ancient covenant promise. Covenant faithfulness on the people's side means taking actions of civil disobedience against the ruling authorities. The Israelites in exile despaired. They believed that the LORD GOD had forgotten and betrayed them.⁵ When Babylonian power and ruthlessness

1 Cover image: **The Workers in the Vineyard** by Kazakhstan Artist **Nelly Bube** (1949-) Vanderbilt University digital library.

2 The parable more aptly is described as, *'the parable of the generous landowner'*.

3 Those conventionally labelled *'tax collectors and sinners'* cf. Mt.9:10-13.

4 It is possible that Jesus used such a story to start a conversation about how society works and how labourers' efforts are exploited.

5 Cf. Is.49:14

dominated the Jerusalem establishment, it seemed that GOD was not really in control of the events in their lives. The exiles were in the same position as earlier slave workers in Egypt. Feeling abandoned and believing the ancient covenant had failed, the exiles found little attraction in the prophet's words of invitation to seek GOD (v.1).

However the prophet discerned things differently. He affirms that GOD's WORD of commitment to the covenant promise is still alive and in effect (v.3).⁶ The prophet insists that the old traditions count. So he declares that *the Exodus* is still the normal way that the LORD acts.⁷ Having said that the present moment brings the old traditions to fruition, the prophet calls the Israelites in exile to make a decision. The choice is: act as though GOD is not in charge of history and stay in exile, or affirm GOD's reigning and risk going home.⁸ The Israelites in exile either trust in the LORD's liberating WORD or they don't (vv.6-11). The decision is based on how people discern their present situation and trust their tradition. The prophet can only set out the options.

From the discernment of *second Isaiah* comes political and economic decisions that entail the transformation of the Israelite world. A transfer of power is made possible by the prophet's invitation to weigh up the options. The choice is about issues as crucial as working life; bread; wine; and milk and money.⁹ It would be an act of civil disobedience to stop working for rewards that do not and cannot satisfy. An oppressive Babylonian economy, would be undermined by the new WORD even while it seems to go on operating. The prophet's announced invitation to make a choice, when the Israelites thought they had no choice, means there is the possibility that the people can act differently.

'*Homecoming*' (v.7) is more than a geographical movement to a new place. *Homecoming* is a community owning in their collective imagination a new world which can be embraced in the liturgy and can be practised concretely here and now. Poems of alternative worlds, present the greatest threat to the empire; especially poems that speak about a new economics. The prophet's word invites those who are beaten, broken and despairing, to return in their imagination to where work and life is not lived in vain. The WORD of the prophet attests that this dreamed-of new world is more powerful; more humane; and finally more real than the world of the empire where GOD does not rule.

response: Psalm 145 : 2 - 3, 8 - 9, 17 - 18

[the greatness and the goodness of God]

*Every day I will bless you,
and praise your name forever and ever.(2)*

6 That 'WORD' from the prophet is now to be expressed in the rise of Persia under Cyrus (cf. *Is.45:1*).

7 cf. *Is.43:1-7*

8 Even if led by a despised non-Israelite – Cyrus. cf. *Is.45:9-13*

9 Cf. *Is.55:1-2a*

*Great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised;
his greatness is unsearchable.(3) . . .
The LORD is gracious and merciful,
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.(8)
The LORD is good to all,
and his compassion is over all that he has made.(9) . . .
The LORD is just in all his ways,
and kind in all his doings.(17)
The LORD is near to all who call on him,
to all who call on him in truth.(18)*

The psalmist lists the LORD's characteristics. The list describes GOD's free, passionate and limitless, self-giving. The LORD is praised as a GOD who is as close to people as any of the gods! The LORD is as regal as any awesome king who does what is great, unsearchable, terrible, glorious, wondrous (vv.3-5). But the difference between the LORD's orderings and worldly orderings, is asserted (vv.8-9). The LORD's main characteristics are: graciousness, mercy, slowness to anger, abounding steadfastness in loving, goodness and compassion. The list describes GOD's free, passionate and limitless self-giving to the covenant partner. In this instance, it is the whole of the created world. The rest of the psalm extends from these verses to explore how God's self-giving is experienced in the daily blessings of creation.

The singing is about the LORD's new world of abundance. In the song the singers enact the overflow and discover some of the abundance had been entrusted into their hands. The grace the singers are left with is: courage, freedom, imagination and sufficient energy to care for the humanness, the humaneness and the humanization of their world. In the act of humanising – the song of praise continues – for creation does what the Creator hopes.

second reading: Philippians 1 : 20 - 24, 27

[Paul's present circumstances]

It is my eager expectation, and hope that I will not be put to shame in any way, but that by my speaking with all boldness, Christ will be exalted now as always in my body, whether by life or by death.(20) For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain.(21) If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labour for me; and I do not know which I prefer.(22) I am hard pressed between the two: my desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better;(23) but to remain in the flesh is more necessary for you.(24) . . . Only, live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that, whether I come and see you or am absent and hear about you, I will know that you are standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel.(27)

The letter was written while Paul waits in prison at Ephesus. The apostle affirms that his life has been an example to his readers of the alternative world

where GOD reigns. The apostle faces the reality of the ending of his personal world.¹⁰ The compassion and love of Christ are to be evident and tangible in the person and actions of a believer, either through their apostolic work or through the manner of their death.

Paul does not know what the decision of his captors will be – whether he will live or die. He ponders and decides in favour of wanting to live so he can continue encouraging the Philippians: *"For your progress and joy in faith"* (v.25). Life in Christ is a shared existence with them. The only guide to an authentic decision is answering the question: *"Will what I think make concrete and actual that sharing?"* The needs of others take precedence over a Christian's personal satisfaction. Paul's confidence stems from his absolute trust – that his personal destiny is in the hands of a generous and loving GOD. He trusts that GOD responds to human need and grants peace to those who pray, but he describes this, *'peace of GOD'* as something that is beyond human understanding.¹¹ Paul's calm acceptance of his future must have had a calming and empowering effect for his Philippian readers, who know him personally. His example would have inspired them to put aside fears for their own lives and helped them to trust GOD's *grace* or *power for life-giving*.

gospel reading: Matthew 20 : 1 – 16

[the parable of the labourers in the vineyard]

Jesus said to his disciples: "For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard.(1) After agreeing with the labourers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard.(2) When he went out about nine o'clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace;(3) and he said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.' So they went.(4) When he went out again about noon and about three o'clock, he did the same.(5) And about five o'clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, 'Why are you standing here idle all day?'(6) They said to him, 'Because no one has hired us.' He said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard.'(7) When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, 'Call the labourers and give them their pay, beginning with the last¹² and then going to the first.'(8) When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage.(9) Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage.(10) And when they received it, they

10 *Philippians* 1:19-25 - Paul debates his prospects of martyrdom or continued missionary labour. While he may long to depart this life and thus be with Christ (v.23), his overall and final expectation is that he will be delivered from this imprisonment and continue in the service of the Philippians and of others (vv.19, 25; & 2:24). In either case, Christ is central (vv.20- 21); if to live, means Christ, for Paul, death also means to be united with Christ, in a deeper sense

11 See *Ph.4:4*.

12 [v.8] *'Beginning with the last . . . the first'* – the purpose of this element of the parable is to show how the first knew what the last were given.

grumbled against the landowner,(11) saying, 'These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.'(12) But he replied to one of them, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage?(13) Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you.(14) Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?'(15) So the last will be first, and the first will be last.'(16)¹³

The owner of a vineyard made a contract with his workers. At the end of the day he pays them each the same, although he contracted them at different times during the day. Those who started early were angry. If it was merely a question of reward for work done, then the landowner seems to have treated the first workings unjustly. But what we are discussing here isn't workers and bosses. It is about the reigning of heaven. The toiling in the vineyard is the work of love. Jesus says about the work of love, that the same thing happens as with a boss who pays equally. In the workings of love, it doesn't matter at what hour you begin or who produces most. The late-comers might have reacted to the landowner's invitation: "*No, it's too late – I would earn very little.*" They hear from the land-owner a promise: "*I'm going to pay you well.*"¹⁴

Jesus tells this parable to Israelites, the ones who went to work first.¹⁵ The history of human liberation began with them. The Israelites believed they were going to have special privileges in '*the reigning of heaven*'.¹⁶ Those who began work first (the Israelite people) were holding to the religious promises that GOD had given them. Those who came later without thinking of those promises thought only of being given a fair go. In the end all receive the same reward: *eternal life*.¹⁷ Jesus spoke these words to peasants and wage-labourers. They were landless and vulnerable to the plotting of exploiters and the powerful.¹⁸

13 [v.16] '*The last will be first . . . last*' – different interpretations have been given to this saying, which comes from Mk.10:31. Jesus' meaning may have been that all who respond to the call at whatever time (first or last), will be the same in respect to inheriting the benefits of the kingdom, which is the gift of GOD.

14 [v.4] '*Whatever is right*' – although the wage is not stipulated as in the case of those first hired, it will be fair.

15 The early Fathers of the Christian church, understood the Christians were the workers who came afterwards! They were going to receive an equal reward!

16 Jesus speaks of different hours and we may believe he also means others who come later, at the end - the atheists! There is no difference among the ones who start working for the reigning of God at different stages in history: although the first ones, says Jesus, are going to be unhappy about the fact (v.16).

17 There's a feeling of superiority among some religious people, who think they are the ones who are going to transform the world – the ones who are going to bring to Earth *the reigning of GOD*. Atheists, the last ones to be engaged, often work harder for *the reigning of GOD* than religious people, without expecting any reward. Here such people seem to be more favoured by Jesus.

18 Jesus' stories about: absentee landlords; rich Dives and poor Lazarus; the behaviour of the unjust judges – are not to be understood as descriptions of GOD as a high-handed member of the ruling elite. Jesus risks to tell stories that illustrate how things are. It is provocative story-telling that includes

Matthew interprets the story as a parable revealing the nature of the reigning of GOD. Matthew thus elides the social elements in Jesus' story-telling. A peasant wage-labourer audience would have interpreted Jesus' story-telling in another way. Jesus was not executed for talking as if he was GOD! He was executed for being politically subversive. The original audience would have known the ideology of the exploitative landowner class. Rather than tell a parable about *'the reigning of Heaven'*, Jesus dares to reflect the reality of how the system works. Modern scriptural interpreters, especially bishops, have been closer to Matthew and the evangelist's church concerns, than they are to the situation of the exploited ones to whom Jesus originally spoke.

Matthew introduces the story by asserting that, *'the kingdom of heaven'* is like this parable (v.1). It is possible that Jesus used the story to start a conversation about, how society works and about how labourers' efforts are exploited. The parable may say nothing about God as generous landowner; nor anything about Matthew's assertion of how, *'the kingdom of Heaven'* functions. Jesus' teaching is clear. Especially in the revealing words of the land-owner's final assertion: *"Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?"* (v.15a).¹⁹

GOD's ways challenge us. A central belief of Catholic Social Teaching confesses that the Earth is GOD's and everything in it. Creation is a gift of GOD and all people and living creatures are a gift to provide for the needs of all for survival, growth and flourishing. The right to private property is not absolute. To accumulate and cling to more and more while others live in desperate poverty is a serious sin against creation and the Creator – setting a pattern of injustice that undermines peace and survival that is planet-wide. Climate change today is the result of the coming together of economic and social systems driven by greed and accumulation, governed to protect inequality and built upon domination and destructio of the Earth. Claims of absolute ownership conflicts with the symbolic order of ancient Israel and the debt-code in the Torah. The debt-code began with the confession that GOD has gifted the land to the people. All are debtors to GOD. All are tenants on GOD's land. That's the reason *land is to be redistributed every Jubilee Year*.²⁰ Its why debts are to be cancelled every Sabbatical Year (v.16).

dangerous social commentary about the way power and access to power actually work in society.

19 [v.16] *'The last will be first . . . last'*: – different interpretations have been given to this saying, which comes from Mk.10:31. Jesus' meaning may have been that all who respond to the call at whatever time (first or last), will be the same in respect to inheriting the benefits of the kingdom, which is the gift of GOD.

20 *The Jubilee Year* was the most radical Israelite concept: that every 49th or *Sabbatical Year*, those who were in debt or lost their land, get to: *"Go past Go and collect \$200!"*

for sharing:²¹

- *The prophet's invitation to abundant life – Comment on Isaiah 55 : 6 – 9*
- *Paul's present circumstances – Comment on Philippiaans 1 : 20 – 24, 27*
- *The parable of the labourers in the vineyard – Comment on Matthew 20 : 1 – 16*

prayer:²²

*GOD most high,
 your ways are not our ways,
 for your kindness
 is lavished equally upon all.
 Teach us to welcome
 your mercy toward others,
 even as we hope
 to receive mercy ourselves.
 We ask this through
 our LORD Jesus Christ, your Son,
 who lives and reigns with you
 in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
 GOD for ever and ever. Amen.*

review:²³

The 'good life' is not earned but a gift. By our own efforts and through education we can acquire an incomplete form of the virtues which dispose us to live well in human society and in harmony with the environment. Since human society and the environment itself is for the sake of the reigning of Heaven, the virtues of justice, courage, self-control and good sense, need to be perfected and enlivened by faith, hope and charity – especially charity. The good life is friendship with GOD, with other people, and with the environment, through which we come to happiness.

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- 21 **Lectio Divina:** reading GOD'S WORD in a moment of prayer and allowing it to enlighten and renew us through reflection. The practise of *lectio divina* requires a quiet place, a passage of Scripture and the willingness to give time to the project. The passage used should be short. We suggest using all or part of the gospel readings of the up-coming Sunday. We let the Holy Spirit lead us to understand the words and allow our heart to speak to GOD in words inspired by the Scripture passage, or by the thoughts that have come to us while reflecting on it. Then we let go of ideas and words and allow ourselves to rest in the presence of GOD in simple and wordless contemplation.
- 22 **The prayer that concludes the Lectio Divina** is ICEL's 1998 opening prayer from the Proper of the Day. These prayers draw upon the concrete and vivid images of Scripture and conclude with a clearly focused petition inspired by the readings.
- 23 **The Review** – examines the themes of the readings, usually drawn from the gospel, providing an opportunity to check our own performance in the light of the WORD and Eucharist that we have previously heard and experienced.