

Twenty-fifth Sunday Per Annum (A)
September 21, 2014.

For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord (Is. 55:9).

The parable of the workers in the vineyard which the sacred liturgy presents to us for our instruction and as an aid to worship is in fact a means by which we enter more deeply into the mystery of God's Kingdom and indeed, the Mystery of God Himself. Our Lord's preaching was such that His parables are meant *to lead gradually to the hidden reality that can only be discovered through discipleship* (Pope Benedict XVI). Discipleship entails instruction and so we repeat the words sung before the proclamation of the Gospel: *Open our hearts, O Lord, to listen to the words of your Son* (Alleluia Verse).

Often our Lord introduces the parable by saying; *the kingdom of heaven is like*. In so doing, He calls our attention to a reality not always immediately evident. The kingdom is a mystery that we do not always perceive and which our Lord reveals to us. This is perhaps especially true of the parable of the workers in the vineyard. *So the last will be first, and the first will be last* (Mt. 20:16). At first hearing, this may sound unfair to us. *Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them received the usual daily wage. And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, saying, 'The 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'* (Mt. 20:16). The labourers' complaint was not that they were defrauded of their rightful wage but that the others had received more than they deserved. Their reaction gives us an insight into the corrosive nature of envy for the envious have as much pain at the success of others as at their own loss. To further appreciate how limiting a force envy is we do well to consider what our Lord is saying to us through the owner of the vineyard: *Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous? / Do you begrudge my generosity?* (RSV) This is a paraphrase of a statement which literally states: *Is your eye evil because I am good?* In many cultures the evil eye is a symbol of the destructive power of envy. The literal reference to the eye in our text reveals something about the personal nature of envy. *Envy arises when a negative passion within me distorts my way of seeing my neighbour* (Erasmus Leiva-Merikakis, *Fire of Mercy Heart of the World*, Vol. III, p. 248). The worker who grumbles at the generosity of the landowner receives what is owed but he is also condemned to being alone with nothing but what is his. *Take what belongs to you and go*. Alienation and isolation are concomitants of the sin of envy. The specific source of the grumblers' anger is that all have been made equal by the Lord, whether they deserve it or not. Yet this is the nature of God's kingdom: it admits all comers and because God's mercy is limitless, no one is excluded, provided the offer of mercy is accepted.

When we read the Gospel parables we see that our Lord often juxtaposes His teaching in view of what the Pharisees taught. Although they were not Israel's official teachers or leaders, the Pharisees (The Jewish historian Josephus Flavius tells us that there were six thousand of them) were popular and held great sway with the masses. The Pharisees were greatly concerned with the cultural and religious crisis of the day: How does one live as a faithful Jew in a land that is ruled and occupied by pagans? Their answer was that Israel must separate itself from all Gentile impurity and defilement. Only this way would God deliver Israel from the clutches of the Romans. The Pharisees, whose name literally means *separated ones* (*perushim*), were religious separatists; while our Lord's proclamation

of the Kingdom was and *is* open to all nations. God's plan of salvation embraces all of humanity and in this plan, as the parable clearly teaches us, difference in time makes no difference in station.

So the last will be first and the first will be last (Mt. 20:16). We are all familiar with this sometimes unsettling refrain of our Lord's teaching which allows for various applications. In a historical sense, it can mean that the Jews, who first chosen by God to receive His revelation, would be surpassed by the Gentiles and so learn humility by witnessing a universal expansion of their own uniqueness. (*Ibid.* p. 252). For us, who are endeavouring to be faithful disciples, it means that we must always seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness and all things shall be ours as well (Cf. *Mt.* 6:33). To endeavour to be *first* in God's eyes is to foster in ourselves a disposition of deep gratitude for the gift of salvation and the saving knowledge that is ours in Christ; a knowledge that frees us from the illusion of self-sufficiency and self-satisfaction.

The Gospel challenges us to rejoice at the generosity of God and to imitate His generosity in sharing with others what He has given to us. As disciples of Christ each one of us has a task in the Lord's vineyard. As we go about our work fulfilling the task assigned to us we are mindful that *to each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good (1Cor. 12:7)*; but all of us must *earnestly desire the higher gifts (1Cor. 12:31)*. The higher gifts are none other than a love that desires the conversion and salvation of all peoples. The temptation to be envious of others, whether in the gifts they possess or the tasks that are theirs; is always a possibility if we lose our focus from the one thing necessary – our own faithful response simply to be faithful to *our* task, to *our* work, our own personal response to discipleship; the living school where we learn to be like Christ because of our intimate communion with Him. This living communion with Jesus Christ unites us with others and so we are always aware that we have undertaken a work in common. The Apostle exhorts us: *Whatever your task, work heartily, as serving the Lord and not men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward; you are serving the Lord Christ (Col. 3:23-24).*

We have opened our hearts to the words of our Lord and we have allowed ourselves to be formed by His divine teaching. The parable of the workers in the Lord's vineyard *is a catechesis meant to transform the natural man and his pagan values and mentality into a Christian with the generous mind and redeeming Heart of Christ (Ibid. p.251)*. This transformation is the work of a lifetime. This is why we are here and why with open hearts we have listened to the words of Jesus. If we persevere along the path that He Himself became for us; if we endeavour to be generous in the sharing of His gifts, His redemption will be ours *both in mystery and in the manner of our life* (Prayer after Communion, Twenty-fifth Sunday Per Annum; *The Roman Missal*).