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Commentary on the Gospel: The Laborers in the Vineyard

Gospel for the 25th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Cycle A), and commentary.

Gospel (*Mt 20:1-16*)

For the kingdom of heaven is like a householder who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard. And going out about the third hour he saw others standing idle in the market

place; and to them he said, 'You go into the vineyard too, and whatever is right I will give you.' So they went. Going out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour, he did the same. And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing; and he said to them, 'Why do you stand here idle all day?' They said to him, 'Because no one has hired us.' He said to them, 'You go into the vineyard too.' And when evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his steward, 'Call the laborers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last, up to the first.' And when those hired about the eleventh hour came, each of them received a denarius. Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received a denarius. And on receiving it they grumbled at the householder, 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.’ But he replied to one of them, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what belongs to you, and go; I choose to give to this last as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?’ So the last will be first, and the first last.”

Commentary

The parable of the workers in the vineyard is one of the most striking images of the kingdom of heaven and hence of how we should respond to the divine call. The image of the vineyard is used frequently in the Old Testament to symbolize the chosen people, whom God looks after with great care and who are meant to produce the good wine of

salvation (cf. *Is* 5:1-7; *Ps* 80; *Ezek* 15:1-8).

As in other parables, the story can disconcert us at first and challenge our yardsticks and values. It might seem to us that the laborers hired at the first hour have a just claim when they say they have worked much more than those the householder hired at the last hour of the day. If the master is generous with those who have worked little, why isn't his generosity shown more clearly to those who have worked longer? But as the owner told one of those complaining: "Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what belongs to you, and go; I choose to give to this last as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity" (vv. 13-15).

The parable teaches us about charity towards God and our neighbor. Since we all receive and benefit from divine mercy in ways we can't even imagine, it makes no sense to demand from God any presumed rights based on justice, or to complain when others benefit from his love. Seeing how generous God is with us requires that we too try to be generous with others.

As Pope Francis said: “With this parable, Jesus wants to open our hearts to the logic of the Father’s love which is free and generous. It is about allowing oneself to be astonished and fascinated by the ‘thoughts’ and the ‘ways’ of God which, as the Prophet Isaiah recalls, are not our thoughts and not our ways (cf. *Is* 55:8). Human thoughts are often marked by selfishness and personal advantages, and our narrow and contorted paths are not comparable to the wide and straight

streets of the Lord. He uses mercy (do not forget this: He uses mercy): he forgives broadly, and is filled with generosity and kindness which he pours forth on each of us. He opens for everyone the boundless territory of his love and his grace, which alone can give the human heart the fullness of joy.”[1]

Saint Josemaria sees the parable as also pointing to the need to take advantage of time to do good, to work in the Lord’s vineyard while carrying out our daily tasks. The owner “goes back several times to the marketplace to hire workers. Some were called at dawn, others almost at nightfall. All receive a silver piece, ‘the wages that I promised you, in other words, my own image and likeness. For the image of the King is engraved on each silver piece’ (St. Jerome, *Commentary on Matthew*, 3, 20). Such is the mercy of God. He calls each

one bearing in mind their personal circumstances, because he wants ‘all men to be saved’ (1 Tim 2:4). In our case, we were born Christians, brought up in the faith, and then we received a clear calling from Our Lord. The facts are undeniable. Therefore, when you sense he’s beckoning you, even if it is at the last hour, how can you think of lingering in the marketplace, basking in the sun as so many of those workers did, because they had time on their hands?”[2]

“Come with me to Mary, the Mother of Christ,” Saint Josemaria invites us. “You, who are our Mother and have seen Jesus grow up and make good use of the time he spent among men, teach me how to spend my days serving the Church and all mankind. My good Mother, teach me, whenever necessary, to hear in the depths of my heart, as a gentle reproach, that my time is not my

own, because it belongs to Our Father who is in Heaven.”[3]

[1] Pope Francis, *Angelus*, 24 September 2017.

[2] Saint Josemaria, *Friends of God*, no. 42.

[3] *Ibid.* no. 54.

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