

25th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle A

Isaiah 55:6-9

Psalms 145:2-3, 8-9, 17-18

Philippians 1:20C-24, 27A

Matthew 20:1-16A

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Children seem to be born with an acute sense of injustice. One of the first sentences that a youngster learns to say is invariably, "That's not fair!" A little boy watching to see that his piece of cake is no smaller than the portion given to his sister seems to be endowed with the exacting eye of a diamond cutter.

I think that if today's Gospel were explained to a young child, he or she would agree that the workers who had labored all day in the hot sun for the same wage as the late comers, had a legitimate grievance. A child would consider that the vineyard owner was being unfair.

If we were hearing today's Gospel for the first time, we too might disapprove of the landowner's hiring practices. However, Jesus obviously endorses the vineyard owner's actions, and even says that this is the way things will be done in the Kingdom of God. So, preachers have long been determined to *explain away* the sense of injustice that listeners to the story have instinctively felt. And after 2,000 years, we have largely succeeded.

Adult Christians today are unlikely to be startled or made uncomfortable by this Gospel story. When we hear it, several explanations and justifications for the landowner's actions come immediately to mind. We've learned our lessons well. We're no longer worried by the behavior of this figure whom Jesus intends to represent

God, and God's relationship with us. And that's fine. But I think in the process something important has been lost.

You see, Jesus *wants* his listeners to be confused and frustrated by this story. Virtually all the sayings and stories of Jesus are intended to provoke the same reaction. Parable after parable is designed to flabbergast his hearers. Parable after parable is intended to offend even the most elementary moral sense: full pay for workers who didn't earn it, an expensive party for an ungrateful young man who has frittered away his father's money on drunken debauchery.

Each of us could probably name a parable that we still find unsettling. For me it is the one about the steward who knows he is about to lose his job. He calls in his boss's debtors one by one, and cooks the books. He reduces the amount that each one of these folks owes his master, so that after he is fired he will have some friends who owe him favors. And in the parable, Jesus seems to be *praising* this fellow for his ingenuity!

The early Church found all this very disturbing. The Gospel writers themselves often try to resolve the contradictions. Jesus takes the disciples aside and supposedly reveals what he *really* means. Scripture scholars tell us that these explanations probably represent the early Church's efforts to explain away the shocking elements in the parables -- the beginning of a process that continues today.

So Jesus is *trying* to shock, annoy and frustrate us. He is trying to overturn everything we take for granted -- everything we assume is true. But why is he doing this?

Some clues can be found in our first reading from Isaiah. Speaking on God's behalf, the prophet says, "My thoughts are not your thoughts,

nor are your ways my ways... As high as the heavens are above the earth, so high are my ways above your ways and my thoughts above your thoughts." In other words, human wisdom is not enough. If it were -- if human beings could figure everything out for themselves, they wouldn't have much use for God. By overturning what we assume to be true, our Gospel reveals a divine wisdom, incalculably more profound than our own, which is essential to our salvation.

Isaiah also implores his listeners to, "Seek the Lord while he may be found, call to him while he is still near." There is an urgency in these words that one also finds in Jesus' teaching. The Gospels tell us that we have to decide right now whether we are going to give ourselves to Christ. There is no postponing the decision.

In calling us to conversion, Jesus is asking us to make a profound change in our lives. He knows, though, that people who are self-confident and at ease with the world around them, people who think they already know most of the answers, aren't likely to change much. They aren't likely to turn their lives around and head in a completely new direction. Oh, they might be willing to make a few adjustments to their lifestyle -- to add a few of Jesus' ideas to their world-view, but they aren't going to abandon everything and start afresh with Jesus. They won't leave mother and father without saying goodbye, or let the dead bury the dead. That's why Jesus has to thoroughly shake us up first.

If he can catch us off guard for just a moment, anything is possible. Our old assumptions can be swept away, and God's truth can break into our everyday world. There are certain moments when a profound conversion to Christ suddenly becomes possible -- when we can say with Paul, "For me 'life' *means* Christ." May our Eucharist today be such a

moment for us.