

The 25th Sunday of Year A: God's ways are not ours, which is just as well!

1st Reading: Isaiah 55:6-9: God is utterly different from us;

2nd Reading: Philippians 1:20-24+27: Paul's dilemma: prefer death or life?

Gospel: Matthew 20:1-16a: Vineyard labourers parable: how is this 'fair'?

Many preachers try to make religion "relevant" to everyday life, in the sense that they want to show that many religious themes are just like those in our ordinary lives. To me, this is fine as far as it goes, but ultimately, faith has to be different. Why professional sport is so popular is because it takes us away from our everyday lives – people of all beliefs, jobs, races, political views, etc, sink their differences when supporting a team or an individual player. This is why good performers in many sports can earn such huge salaries in their short careers.

I had better bring this back to religion! Just as no-one would want their favourite football or rugby team to be as 'ordinary' as they are, so also with religion. The whole point of it is that we accept the existence of a being who is utterly different from us, who creates and maintains the Universe, but who also wants a relationship with each of us, in what we call "faith". The idea of God being very different from us is the theme of the 1st reading & gospel this Sunday.

The first reading is from the middle part of the Book of Isaiah, which was probably written about 550 BC - towards the end of the Jews' exile in Babylon. It has a sense of hope and comfort in the presence of an almighty God: "*Let (the sinner) turn back to the Lord, who will take pity on him, to our God who is rich in forgiving.*" The reason for this confidence? "*My thoughts are not your thoughts; my ways not your ways, it is the Lord who speaks.*" For the writer, this difference between God and us is something for which we should be grateful: it offers sinners the hope of mercy, which they could not expect from human judges.

However, it is in the gospel that we get an idea of the gulf between common human attitudes and what Jesus teaches about his Father. I do recommend that you read this parable, because the central message is both shocking and hopeful. I mentioned last week how the Roman "denarius" coin (our old 'd' or old penny) was a day's wage for a labourer in the ancient world. The parable describes a landowner hiring labourers for his vineyard at harvest time. Starting at dawn (probably about 6am on our clocks), they agreed to work a 12-hour shift for the usual one denarius each. Later, at about 9am, he hired more workers; he did the same about noon and 3pm. Finally, "*at the 11th hour*" (about 5pm) he did the same again. These men would probably have been elderly or in poor health, whom no-one else would have wanted to hire.

At the end of the working day (6pm to us), it was payment-time. The last arrivals were given one denarius each, so when those who had been taken-on at 6am came for their wages, they expected to get more, but they also got the one

denarius that they had agreed with the employer. They grumbled: “ *The men who came last have done only one hour, yet you have treated them the same as us, who have done a heavy day’s work in all the heat..* ” Surely they were right to be annoyed? What would the leaders of the unions currently causing strikes in the health & railway sectors have said to this employer? What’s more, in modern English we use the phrase “coming at the 11th hour” to mean arriving at the last minute for something important, when everyone else was there all the time.

The reason why some may feel annoyed with the landowner in the parable is due to our sense of ‘natural justice’, which is based on the idea of treating equal cases equally, and unequal cases differently. This would mean: either the 12-hour-shift-men would have got more than the one denarius, or those who had worked fewer hours would have received less. The “sting” is in the equal payment for unequal amounts of work. The problem: this is exactly the point Jesus is making about “the Kingdom of Heaven” – God’s dealings with us – being so different.

I shall make two comments on this. The first is simply that in the parable, no-one suffered: the first-comers received the fee that they had agreed; the owner was merely being generous to the late-comers. Jesus has the man saying to the grumblers: “ *I choose to pay the last-comer as much as I pay you. Why be envious because I am generous?* ” Strong people have often held the weak in contempt, because they could not (or would not) achieve the same results as themselves. In Jesus’ religious circles, the Pharisees saw the Jews as the “first-comers”, who had had about 1800 years of religious relationship with God, since Abraham’s time. Gentile converts to Judaism were often seen as “Johnny-come-lately” types who did not really merit salvation. Jesus’ parable contradicts this attitude.

My 2nd comment is to apply this to us. Decades ago, old-style Catholics used to comment on a person who had been ‘away from the Church’ most their life getting the priest to their death-bed. They would say: “He / she got in (to heaven) by the skin of their teeth”, or something similar. The implied criticism was that others had practised faith all their lives, while this one hadn’t bothered; now he / she was ‘getting in’ at the last minute – like the latecomers getting their denarius in the parable. However, the problems are these: few of us know when our “11th hour” is going to be; how many of us can say that we really have worked hard “in all the heat” (ie, lived well) all of our lives? How many have weaknesses that they are relying on God to excuse or forgive when the time comes?

As we grow older (this writer included!) the more we tend to realize that we cannot “earn” salvation – or God’s love – simply by our own merits. Yes, we do have a real part to play in God’s plan of salvation for us (the ‘latecomers’ at least did one hour in the vineyard), but the fact that God works in a different way from human justice makes me, at least, very grateful. *Fr Jim Dunne.*

