

The Terms of the Kingdom
Septuagesima Sunday
(from the Gospel: St. Matthew xx.1.)

THE kingdom of heaven is like unto a man that is an householder, which went out early in the morning to hire labourers into his vineyard. And when he had agreed with the labourers for a penny a day, he sent them into his vineyard. And he went out about the third hour, and saw others standing idle in the market-place, and said unto them, Go ye also into the vineyard, and whatsoever is right I will give you. And they went their way. Again he went out about the sixth and ninth hour, and did likewise. And about the eleventh hour he went out, and found others standing idle, and saith unto them, Why stand ye here all the day idle? They say unto him, Because no man hath hired us. He saith unto them, Go ye also into the vineyard; and whatsoever is right, that shall ye receive. So when even was come, the lord of the vineyard saith unto his steward, Call the labourers, and give them their hire, beginning from the last unto the first. And when they came that were hired about the eleventh hour, they received every man a penny. But when the first came, they supposed that they should have received more; and they likewise received every man a penny. And when they had received it, they murmured against the good-man of the house, saying, These last have wrought but one hour, and thou hast made them equal unto us, which have borne the burden and heat of the day. But he answered one of them, and said, Friend, I do thee no wrong; didst not thou agree with me for a penny? Take that thine is, and go thy way; I will give unto this last even as unto thee. Is it not lawful for me to do what I will with mine own? Is thine eye evil, because I am good? So the last shall be first, and the first last: for many be called, but few chosen.

Today's Gospel is another example of the words of our Lord that, studied superficially, provoke many problems. The issue of fairness comes to mind immediately. How is it that the owner of the vineyard would apportion the same wage to workers who had endured the worst conditions and labored the longest as those who had done virtually nothing, and therefore deserved the least? We cannot help but share in the indignation of those who had been hired first, when the time came to receive their wages. We cannot help but greatly resent with them the owner, who doesn't seem to care about anything other than his own strange, arbitrary way of settling up. In this parable, if the owner represents the Lord, and the day's work represents our time here on earth, we become even more aggrieved. We might be inclined to cry, "Do you mean to say that God takes so little account of what we do for Him, and pays so little attention to our efforts, our piety, our level of commitment, and self-sacrifice, that He doles out as much eternal reward due us, to others who have just barely said a 'sinner's prayer' and repented of their sins, ...saved by the skin of their teeth, as it were?" Such a conclusion, if it didn't provoke us to anger and bitterness, might plummet us into discouragement, and act as a real damper to our enthusiasm in serving Christ.

One might even decide that the message of this story sounds like socialism. There seems to be no difference between the doctor and the dishwasher, the professional singer and the karaoke entertainer, the professor and the pupil. Effort and skill seem to be afforded no value.

There is a bland sameness to everything. The labor of all, whether little or much, is sacrificed to some higher good that leaves the individual unrequited. Doesn't this encourage contempt for human effort, and irresponsibility and laziness for those who expect to get something for nothing?

For these reasons it is important to understand the meaning of this parable. There is no question that the lessons to be learned from it are very difficult ones, because they are humbling. They vastly amplify the kindness, love, grace, and favor of the householder, who surely is a figure of Christ, and obligate us to look much less at the merit and value of our own accomplishments, however outstanding they may be. There is much good news here for those who struggle with the value of their life and work and service to God.

First of all, let's remember that this is a "Kingdom parable" (*The kingdom of heaven is like..*). There are nearly a dozen of these in the Gospel of Matthew. Each of them speaks of an "economy", a system of life that is vastly different from anything found on earth. It is governed by principles and laws that bear no resemblance to the organizations of this world. And this is precisely why Jesus must instruct us about the way it works. His Jewish audience, for instance, would have assumed that reward is directly in proportion to merit.

But let's look at the parable, and note a few things. First, there would have been no wages whatsoever, if there had been no vineyard, and no owner to administrate it. Although he needs workers to labor, they are in far greater need, for if they had no labor, they have no livelihood, whereas he could exist without them, if he so chose. So they are at his disposal. He names the terms, because he is responsible for the whole system.

They agree to labor for a certain wage, and are apparently entirely satisfied with it, as they immediately begin work (note that the word "penny" should be "denarius", which was the equivalent of an average day's wage). Had there been no further hiring during the day, with the new hires being paid the identical wage of the old, then there would have been no grumbling. It all started when the comparison began. Suddenly, that which had been satisfactory and right now looked meager and unfair. Their smiles of relief at having been hired at all now turn to frowns of complaint and accusations of injustice. The kindness of the landowner's original offer of employment, their change from the status of being among the unemployed to fully employed, the prospect of getting the wage they had been promised at the end of the day, all have lost their value. They are not only resentful that their wages weren't proportionately increased to account for

the length of their work, but are confounded and amazed that their employer would honor others who didn't deserve it with the same payment. Why?

How does this parable translate into a teaching that tells us something about God, heaven, and us? If the vineyard is the Kingdom, and the laborers are those invited to work within it, the entire image is seen in a different light. What other response other than humble gratitude can be the attitude of sinners who are invited into God's presence to work for Him, regardless of the terms? What if we had been left outside the vineyard? Was its Owner really under any compulsion to hire anyone? Does the way He chooses to deal with others whom He brings inside in any way affect the way He chooses to deal with me? If I had never cast a longing, inquiring, and curious eye --not minding my own business-- on how He works with them, I would never have lost sight of the infinite value of his work with me. Further, I would even have rejoiced in their success and blessing, even if it had equalled or exceeded my own. Why? Because I judge the Owner to be good and fair and right, as much as to others as to me. And, simply to be working within the vineyard...! What else could I ask for? Would that in itself not constitute enough wage for me, and if more were added, would that not simply be even greater evidence of the love and character of the Owner, who owed neither me nor anyone else any kindness at all?

What must I do, then, to guard myself against resentment and envy? I must render my services to God without thought of their extent, their cost to me, their hardship, their duration, and anything else about them that I felt deserved attention or glory or mention! I can only assume that my very best stills falls woefully short of what such a kind and gracious Master, One who would give His life upon the Cross for my sins, deserves from me. Instead of focusing on the sun and the heat and the misery of my working conditions, on the days and the months and the years, all of which is a very real picture of life on this earth, I must instead fill my thoughts with the generosity of the One who extends grace in great measure in amounts and ways that I cannot understand. He specializes in blessing the undeserving. He welcomes those who come to the gate of the vineyard in the last minutes it is open. Then I won't have to hear Him say to me:

Friend, I do thee no wrong; didst not thou agree with me for a penny? Take that thine is, and go thy way; I will give unto this last even as unto thee. Is it not lawful for me to do what I will with mine own? Is thine eye evil, because I am good?

At the very end of this Gospel, we are left with some profoundly difficult words: *So the last shall be first, and the first last: for many be called, but few chosen.* A discipline of humility throughout our Christian lives will assist us against putting ourselves forward to claim the "first place" that may wind up placing us last. We must be exercised not to take ourselves and our ac-

complishments and good works efforts too seriously! We must remember the attitude that Jesus Himself admonished us to assume:

So likewise you, when you have done all those things which you are commanded, say, 'We are unprofitable servants. We have done what was our duty to do.' " Lk 17:10

It is always best to agree with God as quickly as possible about the way He chooses to do things. We must fit into His universe, not He into ours. We must unlearn the ways of the kingdom of this world, in order to re-learn the ways of God's Kingdom, where our eternal citizenship belongs.

God names the terms and makes the option available to everyone.

And the Spirit and the bride say, Come. And let him that heareth say, Come. And let him that is athirst come. And whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely. (Rev. 22:17)

But will we accept them? For indeed, *many be called, but few chosen.*

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.