

THE EMMAUS SERIES

25th Sunday Year A

Isaiah 55: 6-9

Philippians 1: 2-24, 27

Matthew 20: 1-16

Why be envious because I am generous?

‘The last will be first and the first last’. These words of Jesus, with which today’s reading from Matthew concludes, occur in different contexts in all three synoptic gospels – God’s ways constantly overturn our human expectations. And that is the lesson of the parable in today’s gospel. Of all the parables of Jesus, the story of the labourers in the vineyard is probably the most puzzling for Christians of successive generations. That means that it is a great success, that it achieves what Jesus intended. A plausible story, reflecting the common experience of his hearers begins to unfold. It was normal for day labourers seeking employment to gather in public places. One denarius would have been a normal day’s wage. We are given a hint where the story is leading however; Israel, the Lord’s vineyard, was a familiar theme of the scriptures. An element of suspense holds the attention of the listeners – what is the unusual behaviour of the landowner leading to? Then the conclusion of the story comes as a shock, leaving us unsettled, as our reasonable expectations are not fulfilled.

That is the purpose of the parable, to invite us to leave aside the human logic and predictability with which we shape our world, and to enter the Kingdom announced by the Saviour, the new world shaped by God’s generous and merciful ways. This parable may have been directed originally at the Pharisees’ refusal to hear the Good News of God’s ways brought by Jesus; but the fact that we still find ourselves challenged by the story indicates that it has a lesson that is valid for every generation.

‘Did we not agree? Take yours earnings’. God will never be unjust. But the Lord’s great plan for the human family has a measure that goes far beyond our human calculations of what is appropriate and just – designs of generosity and mercy conceived in the eternal depths of the divine freedom. ‘Yes, the heavens are as high above earth as my ways are above your ways’.

Jesus is calling us to bow down before the mystery of God’s ‘grace’. ‘Why be envious because I am generous?’ ‘Grace’ is the term used by the scriptures, for this new world of God’s generosity announced by Jesus. In a sense, ‘grace’ is the essential message of the New Testament - where the term occurs countless times: ‘God’s grace has been revealed to save the whole human race’ (Titus 2:11); ‘It is by God’s grace you have been saved, through faith; not by anything of your own ... so that nobody can claim the credit’ (Eph 2:8). The ‘grace’ or favour of God announced in the Christian gospel is God’s generous outreach to each one of us determined before time began. Because God’s will is effective and all-powerful, ‘grace’ also refers to the many blessings of our new life in Christ. Our Catholic upbringing has stressed these created effects; but we should have given more attention to the folly of divine love made known to us through these blessings. This, we could say, is the point of Jesus’ parable: ‘Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with all the spiritual blessings of heaven in Christ’ (Eph 1:3).

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