

01/31/21

Septuagesima Sunday

The Kingdom of Heaven—governed by “grace alone”

Matt. 20: 1-16

For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. **2)** Now when he had agreed with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard. **3)** And he went out about the third hour and saw others standing idle in the market-place, **4)** And said to them, “You also go into the vineyard, and whatever is right I will give you.” So they went. **5)** Again he went out about the sixth and the ninth hour, and did likewise. **6)** And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing idle, and said to them, “why have you been standing here idle all day?” **7)** They said to him, “Because no one hired us.” He said to them, “You also go into the vineyard, and whatever is right you will receive.” **8)** So when evening had come, the owner of the vineyard said to his steward, “Call the laborers and give them their wages, beginning with the last to the first.” **9)** And when those came who were hired about the eleventh hour, they each received a denarius. **10)** But when the first came, they supposed that they would receive more; and they likewise received each a denarius. **11)** And when they had received it, they complained against the landowner, **12)** saying, “These men have worked only one hour, and you made them equal to us who have borne the burden and the heat of the day.” **13)** But he answered one of them and said, “Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? **14)** Take what is yours and go your way. I wish to give to this last man the same as to you. **15)** Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with my own things? Or is your eye evil because I am good?” **16)** So the last will be first, and the first last. For many are called, but few chosen.

Grace be unto you and peace, from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

During the Epiphany Season, Mary’s Son is unveiled for us—revealed to us—as the Son of God, and the joyous strains of that theme reached a breath-taking crescendo in last Sunday’s Gospel, in which St. Matthew described for us our Lord’s transfiguration on the holy mountain. Today’s *Introit* has introduced a different tone entirely. “The sorrows of death compassed me,” our choir sang for us in the words of the Psalmist, “the sorrows of hell compassed me about. In my distress I called upon the Lord, and He heard my voice out of His temple.” It is worth considering the Church’s purpose in this tonal change.

In the early Church, catechumens were baptized on Easter Sunday, and the weeks before that Feast Day were for those students of the faith a time of intense preparation. They were to realize that Christ now called them to take up with utter seriousness their new life as His people. The readings and the propers for these Sundays leading up to the Lenten fast reminded them that it was a hard path to which they were being called—a battle, a difficult race that demands training and dedication, a day of strenuous labor in our Lord’s vineyard. In heartfelt repentance, they were to take up in earnest the new life which was theirs through faith in Christ.

Also for us, these weeks before Lent are a time of penitent preparation. The appointed Gospels present some of the foundational themes of the Christian message—grace alone, faith alone which is given to us by the Holy Spirit through God’s Word alone, our call to work in our Lord’s kingdom. We prepare to walk with our Savior through His Passion so that we may consider our sin and our sinfulness in the light of Scripture and in the light of the enormous cost which Christ Jesus paid for our redemption. We make that journey so that our joy will be all the greater on Easter Morning, and so that we will be all the more determined to run, to fight, to work—with our Lord’s help and in the light streaming from His empty tomb.

I

“The last will be first, and the first last,” Jesus says as a summary of His parable in our text. And we need to consider here the context for His little story of the workers in the vineyard so that we may better grasp His meaning. Our Lord had told a wealthy young man that he should sell all that he had, give the proceeds to the poor, and then, having left behind his life of ease and privilege, he should follow Jesus. Rather than do that, Matthew tells us, the rich young man had instead turned away from the Prophet from Galilee. But Jesus’ words had raised a question in the mind of His disciple Peter, who then asked Him, “Lord, we have left all and followed You. Therefore what shall we have?” Jesus’ answer to Peter really has two parts. First, our Lord assured Peter that there is indeed a heavenly reward of grace for those who follow Him—one that far outweighs what we give up for Him. But then Jesus adds the same thought with which He ends His parable, “Many who are first will be last, and the last first.” And He tells this little story of the workers in the vineyard as the second part of His answer to Peter. Like virtually all of Jesus’ other parables, also this one is not difficult or obscure. The message is simply this, that our salvation, and our call to work in our Lord’s vineyard, and any reward that we might receive from His bounty—all these come to us purely as His gift, out of His gracious and unmerited love and not because of what we have earned.

If we are honest with ourselves, we will admit that, when we first hear our Lord's parable, there is something in it which bothers us. In Jesus' story, those who were hired first lodge with the landowner what seems to us to be a valid complaint, "These last men have worked only one hour, and you made them equal to us who have borne the burden and the heat of the day." Something in us wants to take their side. The payments, we think, should be fair and proportional. Those who have toiled and sweated the whole day should earn more than those who came late and worked for only one hour. Our moral sense tells us that we should get what we earn. That is really the way it should work in the world.

But that is just the point of Jesus' parable. He is not talking about this world. He wants us to understand something about the kingdom of heaven, the kingdom of God. In our Lord's kingdom, it is His grace which is the ruling principle, not what we think is fair. And Scripture teaches us that it is only His grace—that purely free and unmerited love which is so foreign to our sense of what is just and right—on which we must depend for our salvation. Our sense that the reward should be earned—that we should get what we have merited—is what St. Paul calls "the offense of the cross." It offends our sense of fairness—this truth that it is God's grace alone which gives us everything.

II

"The last shall be first and the first shall be last," Jesus says. During our journey with Him through His Passion and toward His empty tomb on Easter Morning, we pay attention to how Scripture teaches us to be those "last" ones whom our Lord Himself makes to be "first"—attention to how Scripture teaches us to be thankful that it is God's grace which is the operational principal in His kingdom, and not our ideas of justice and merit.

The repentance which is in this way cultivated in us has nothing to do with "low self-esteem" in the psychological sense. It has nothing to do with some kind of personal modesty or with down-playing the gifts we have received from our Lord. We learn of the depth of our sin and our sinfulness and our need for a Savior only by taking seriously what the Lord Himself says about us through the psalmist, that we are "conceived and born in sin," and by hearing what He says to us through His prophet Isaiah, that all of us are "sheep (who) have gone astray, everyone to his own way." As Luther said, we need to check whether we are still made of mortal flesh and blood and then accept in humble faith that our mortality is our Lord's just verdict against our fallenness—that it is "the soul that sins (who) will die."

It is only our Lord's pure grace that has brought about our redemption. It was not our labors for Him that caused the Son of God to

become our Brother in the womb of the Virgin. It was not because we had earned His love that He put Himself under the Law for our sakes. It was not as payment for our goodness that He shed His blood for us. It was only because of His pure grace—that purely unmerited love which goes against our thinking but upon which, as we learn from Scripture, we must utterly depend. The suffering, the shame, the death on Calvary’s cross—that is what should have been ours according to our rules of earning and payment.

“So the last will be first, and the first last,” Jesus tells us. What comes all-too naturally to us is to think we have earned something, worked longer than others, been more law-abiding and righteous than others. Once again on this *Septuagesima* Sunday, our Lord calls us to turn from thoughts of earning and payment. He rules His kingdom by grace alone. We thank God that He does.

III

And there is another point for us to ponder in this parable of our Lord. We have just come out of the season of Epiphany during which the Church has traditionally reflected on her task of sharing the life-giving Gospel of Christ with all people. Likewise, these Sundays before the Lenten Season are a time when His people of faith take seriously the calling they have received to work for our Lord.

His kingdom, He tells us, is like a vineyard in which there is so much that needs doing—building fences and tilling the soil and planting the vines and supplying them with water and pulling the weeds that crop up so quickly and gathering the harvest. Our Lord calls us to work in His vineyard, to labor with joy, to “bear the burden and the heat of the day” by using in His service the talents and gifts which we have received from Him—by inviting others to join us in our worship, by planning our congregation’s work, by singing to His glory, by caring for His house, by giving for His work as He has blessed us. “The last shall be first,” Jesus says, and thereby He has blessed even the humblest service that we can offer.

“The grace of God”—with His parable Jesus leads us to ponder what those words really mean for us. It is purely by His grace and not because of our merit that He has redeemed us from sin and death. It is purely by His grace and not because of our deserving that He has called us into His kingdom. And it is purely out of His grace and not because of our long hours of labor that He makes us—who by ourselves would be last—to be first. In the coming weeks, as we make our way to the empty tomb of Easter morning, we will want to cling in faith and joy to that life-giving truth.

May the Holy Spirit grant that to us for Jesus’ sake. Amen.