

SPIRITUALITY

GOSPEL ACCLAMATION

cf. Acts 16:14b

R⁷. Alleluia, alleluia.

Open our hearts, O Lord,
to listen to the words of your Son.

R⁷. Alleluia, alleluia.

Gospel Matt 20:1-16a; L133A

Jesus told his disciples this
parable:

“The kingdom of heaven is like
a landowner
who went out at dawn to hire
laborers for his vineyard.
After agreeing with them for the
usual daily wage,
he sent them into his vineyard.
Going out about nine o’clock,
the landowner saw others
standing idle in the
marketplace,
and he said to them, ‘You too go
into my vineyard,
and I will give you what is just.’
So they went off.
And he went out again around noon,
and around three o’clock, and did
likewise.
Going out about five o’clock,
the landowner found others standing
around, and said to them,
‘Why do you stand here idle all day?’
They answered, ‘Because no one has hired
us.’
He said to them, ‘You too go into my
vineyard.’
When it was evening the owner of the
vineyard said to his foreman,
‘Summon the laborers and give them
their pay,
beginning with the last and ending with
the first.’
When those who had started about five
o’clock came,
each received the usual daily wage.
So when the first came, they thought that
they would receive more,
but each of them also got the usual wage.

Reflecting on the Gospel

There is an old joke about a Protestant being led around heaven by St. Peter. They pass a room and St. Peter says, “Be quiet around this room.” To which the Protestant asks, “Why?” Peter responds, “In that room are the Catholics, and they think they’re the only ones here.”

Jesus was a master teacher. His parables inspired and they were remembered in part because they were simple stories that conveyed multiple layers of meaning. Each story seems to have a variety of possible entry points, as does today’s gospel. Is the landowner truly just when he gives all the workers the

same wage? What would unionized workers say about this practice? Why does the landowner distribute wages in the manner he does, with those who worked the longest receiving their pay last? Is he trying to incite a riot, or maybe inspire jealousy and envy?

All of these questions and more may be conjured up by a quick reading of the parable.

Not only was Jesus a master teacher, but we recall that he taught two thousand years ago! One challenge is that some of his stories are set deeply in the milieu of his context. The parable is not in fact making statements about modern labor law or the role of unions or day laborers. Instead, landowners in Jesus’ time had incredible power over workers and over their property. Perhaps because

there were no labor unions, guest worker programs, or labor laws to protect workers, the landowner was able to act with impunity. This kind of power makes for an apt image of a powerful and unaccountable God!

So Jesus uses the character of the landowner in the parable to say that God gives each his or her due at the very least, and he is generous. It is not up to us to tell God how and in what way he is to be generous with his resources. God gives to each what he will, though not less than what he promised.

In the early church this parable was often interpreted in terms of Jews and Gentiles, with Jews being the early workers and Gentiles being those who came late. God gives each a share of his kingdom. All will likely be surprised by the generosity of God and by who appears at the heavenly banquet. Ideally, no one group will think its members are the only ones to share in God’s goodness.

Living the Paschal Mystery

It’s probably the case that none of us enjoy being supplicants. We all tend to work for a wage we consider just (if and when possible) and expect to be paid for our labor. When we see acts of generosity, it can be natural to expect that we might receive some of that generosity as well. It sounds strange to hear it said that someone is generous only with one group and not another. And such is the seeming riddle of today’s parable.

God is a just and generous giver. When we receive what we have from God, there is no room for complaint, jealousy, or envy. The gifts of God are given to whom he will. Let us die to our own sense of who is just and worthy in God’s sight and leave room to be surprised by his generosity. None of us can predict the actions of God.



Continued in Appendix A, p. 302.