

Twenty-Fifth Third Sunday in Ordinary Time A2023

The logic of our modern society is based on work, merits and money. Those who, by their work, make a good amount of money are called successful persons. So, the harder someone works, the more successful he is; the more effort one puts in, the more recompense he has. In the end, it all comes to one thing, "everybody deserves the fruit of his work".

That is how we function as society. This logic, so simple and so human, that consists in judging the merits of someone by the quantity of work produced, is the opposite of God's logic. God's kingdom obeys other rules and laws than human. God's logic is not our logic; his thoughts are not our thoughts and his ways are not our ways.

That's what Isiah reminds us in the first reading; that's what Jesus tells us in the parable. Imagine the shock of the first employees hired early in the day when they received the same pay with those who worked just one hour. Is it not unfair to treat all the workers in the same way? Is not that an abuse of distributive justice? Is not that a violation of the principle of just recompense? I guess that if that happened today, "Workers' unions" would rise up and denounce a company that does such a thing. We too, like the first employees, feel some indignation. Yet it is here we find the point of parable.

The context of the parable refers to the history of the early Church. The disciples were the first to welcome Jesus' message and to follow him. With his preaching other people entered the Church. Their presence has raised the question of whether the disciples would receive the same recompense with them or not. The same is also true with the situation of the Jews and the pagans, or the just and sinners, in relation to the salvation proclaimed by Jesus.

For Jesus, even if the pagans or sinners, like publicans and prostitutes, have decided late to believe in God thanks to his teaching, while at the beginning they were reluctant (like the people who had been standing around "idle" in the marketplace and came to the vineyard later in the day), they will receive the same place in God's kingdom.

In other words, God does not act according to distributive justice, but according to the need of each one. That need is the salvation each expects from God. Anytime someone changes his life and believes in God, he is offered salvation. Distributive justice repays each according to the work produced. Salvation, on the contrary, is a gift that God gives us independent of our works. It is not a salary we receive from him. It would be a misconception to consider it as a reward we receive because of our merits. Before God everything is grace and not an earning. That is why, in the end, the landowner gave to each of the employees what he deemed just for his survival, even if the first workers wanted to have more than the others.

Moreover, eternal salvation is so important that God does not stop offering grace and opportunity for people to come to him. God calls everyone at every hour of the day and he is generous with us. His generosity is symbolized in the parable by the different hours the landowner goes out to hire laborers: six o'clock, nine o'clock, twelve, three and five o'clock.

The persistence of going out at different hours shows that God wants us to be saved. It is his will that we might be saved. The insistence of the landowner, who represents God in the parable, to bring people in his vineyard, is one of the foundations of the ministry of evangelization. It gives us also a duty of working for the salvation of our brothers and sisters by bringing them to the Lord. Because God is generous toward his people, anytime that someone comes to faith, we have to rejoice for his salvation. In the same way, nobody has the right to say it is too late for him to receive eternal salvation.

A detail in the parable draws our attention to one of the plagues of our modern society: the problem of unemployment. The landowner asks: "Why do you stand here idle all day?" They answered: "Because no one has hired us." This response could well be that of millions of unemployed people today. Jesus was not unaware of this problem. If he describes it the parable so well, it is because he had many times looked with compassion upon those groups of people sitting on the ground or leaning against walls, or crossing the streets, at the search for work and waiting to be hired.

The owner of the vineyard knows that the workers of the last hour have the same needs as the others who were hired at the beginning of the day. They too have children to feed, the bills to pay, the rent to honor. By giving everyone the same wage, the owner of the vineyard shows that he is taking into account not only the merit of the workers but their needs. Our capitalistic society bases recompense on merit and on seniority in work, and not on the person's needs. When a young worker has the most need for his family and for a house while his pay is the lowest, he is left alone struggling without knowing how he is going to make it. It is not impossible that he ends up in the street.

Let me finish with the last words we find at the end the parable "the last will be first, and the first will be last". This is a warning we have to take seriously. It reminds us of the reversal of fortune if we are not faithful and abide more closely in the Lord. All of us, that is, those who serve God their whole life, bearing the most fruit with their talents, and those who give God only the leftovers of their life by making amends at the end of their life, should persevere in the Lord.

Let us ask the Lord to give us the same grace he gave St Paul so that he might be glorified in everything we do. Let us ask him to help us be open to our fellows in need, especially the unemployed and the immigrants.

Isaiah 56: 6-9; Philippians 1: 20c-24, 27a; Matthew 20: 1-16a



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