

Reflection for the 25th Sunday in Ordinary time, Cycle A

The lectionary translation of the readings for this Sunday can be found at <https://bible.usccb.org/bible/readings/092423.cfm>

1st Reading: *Isaiah 55:6–9*

This is a section from Chapter 55 of Isaiah. This chapter is different from most of Isaiah because it has the tone of the Jewish Wisdom literature. It speaks to the benefits of hearing the voice of God, presumably as spoken by the prophets. In this call to seek the Lord rather than the things of this world, Isaiah recognizes how close God is to us yet how different and beyond he is from us; a mystery shown in its fullness in Jesus.

2nd Reading: *Philippians 1:20c–24, 27a*

This letter was written to the Philippians while Paul was in prison; we don't know which imprisonment. You can tell from this portion that he is thinking about his death. Yet, the letter is called his "letter of joy" because he is serene and joyful in his expectation of eternal life. You'll hear him say "Christ will be magnified in my body..." ^{Phil 1:21} He means that Christ will be honored by the way he lives or dies. Also, you'll hear Paul say that he doesn't know whether to choose life or death. Actually, he has no choice. He will either be set free or executed. He is considering those eventualities.

Gospel: *Matthew 20:1–16a*

"Thus, the last will be first, and the first will be last." ^{Mt 20:16}

It is so tempting to try to make this Gospel about social justice. You could make the argument that it is about fair labor practices and wage policy. But it's not about that. I think it is about humility.

You can tell by the word in the first sentence that our translation, like many other translations, left out. It's the word "for" and it connects our selection with the verse immediately preceding it (Mt 19:30). Except for the fact that the order is reversed, the verse that precedes our selection is pretty much the same as the verse that ends it, "Thus, the last will be first, and the first will be last." (Mt 20:16) This is called "bookending" and it tells us what the parable is really about.

The verse preceding our selection seems to be saying that those who are rich in this world's terms will be last in the kingdom of heaven's terms. It follows the story of the rich young man who went away sad when Jesus told him he had to give away all his possessions in order to be perfect. This is the one that ends with "...it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for one who is rich to enter the kingdom of God." (Mt 19:24) Peter points out that the twelve have given up everything to follow Jesus and Jesus tells him that they will be taken care of. (Mt 19:27-29) The first/last contrast is set with Jesus' words to Peter.

The selection we have today, though, seems a bit different. It doesn't seem to be a comment about the rich in this-worldly terms. It seems to be about how God treats those who think they deserve more, because they've been around longer, as opposed to how he treats newcomers. If they've made a commitment to do his work, and they follow through on it, he treats them the same no matter when they made that commitment. That's what the workers being paid the same wage, no matter when they started, is all about.

This story only appears in Matthew's Gospel written, evidently, for a Greek-speaking Jewish community at a time when Gentile Christians were outnumbering Jewish Christians. Remember the conflict between the Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians that is so apparent in the letters of St. Paul. That's the setting of this parable being told. It seems to be a message to the Jewish Christians whose specialness, in this-worldly terms, is that they are the "chosen people".

The Jewish Christians were part of the Chosen Race by birthright. The Gentile Christians were latecomers, and they didn't even have to observe some of the traditional practices of the Jewish people. They didn't have to become Jewish; they didn't have to become part of the Chosen Race. This Gospel is about having the humility to fully accept the latecomers who can't claim to be God's chosen race.

How does that relate to our daily lives? There are many people who, for one reason or another, think they are more special than others, and think they should be treated better. Maybe we all do that, at least in our minds. We separate ourselves out from others and try to claim a special place; it's part of our carving out an identity for ourselves. But in God's eyes, we are not any more special than anyone else who has turned to him.

Whatever, in this-worldly terms, makes us think we are special and deserving of special treatment doesn't matter to God. It's like the rich young man. It might be wealth, or it might be power, social standing, race, ethnicity, or whatever else. Whatever it is that makes us feel like we deserve preferential treatment, we need to give that up at least psychologically and spiritually.

The good news is that each one of us is special... to God. In his eyes, each one of us is the very best that there is. Our true identity is "I am a beloved creature of God." I think there is more comfort and peace in that than in trying to separate myself out from everyone else, thinking I'm better than them.

Think about it, each time we pray "Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." we are praying for God's sense of equality to be acted out in our world today. That's humility!

Reflection:

"Thus, the last will be first, and the first will be last." Mt 20:16

Question:

What words or phrases grabbed your attention during the Liturgy of the Word on Sunday? What connection do those words or phrases have to your day-to-day life? (Why do you think they grabbed your attention?) What might God be trying to say to you through these words or phrases? What response should you make? What action should you take?

Alternative:

Reflect upon/share about a time when you received preferential treatment, or maybe didn't receive it but thought you should have. What was the basis for you deserving preferential treatment? What was fair, or unfair, about that to you or to others? What can you do, in humility, to separate yourself from what is unfair to others?

Verse by Verse:

Mt 20:1 "The kingdom of heaven is like..." | In the Greek, the word "for" is at the beginning of this sentence. The actual word order, in Greek, is "Like for is the kingdom of the heavens..." Many

translations, like our lectionary, leave the word “for” out. The UBS Handbook, says the “for” connects this parable to what goes before, Mt 19:30 “...many who are first will be last and the last will be first.” This is, with a differing word order, the same as Mt 20:16, making bookends around this parable and telling us what it is about.

Mt 20:1 “...a landowner who went out at dawn to hire laborers for his vineyard.” | The landowner and vineyard are commonly used images for God and Israel in Hebrew Scripture. (See Is 5:2-7 for an example.) In Christian Scriptures, it would be God and the Christian believers whether they are Jewish Christians or Gentile Christians. Remember how the letters of St. Paul indicate conflict between the Jewish and Gentile Christian communities and Matthew is writing to a community made up of both.

Mt 20:16 “Thus, the last will be first, and the first will be last.” | Note that the story points out that the first hired and the last hired were treated the same. This doesn’t mean that the first lost out on anything. Their point wasn’t that the last should be paid less than a full day’s wage. They just thought they deserved more because they had been there from dawn.