

## **September 20, 2020**

Is 55:6-9; Phil 1:20c-24,27a; Mt 20:1-16a

The master goes out to a group of able-bodied individuals who were lying around: *You too go into my vineyard, and I will give you what is just.* He had made a contract with an earlier group and promised that if they worked for him in his vineyard they would receive what was fair. He keeps this promise to these first ones, but in a strange twist he shows generosity to all who come in response to his call. Jesus says that this tells us about the Kingdom of God. Covenants are made by God and he is as good as his word. The only requirement God makes is to respond to the invitation and go to the vineyard to work. Today Jesus challenges us to see what it means for us to respond when he says: *You too go into my vineyard, and I will give you what is just.*

So if this vineyard is the world, and the Master is God - then what is God asking us to do? Workers in an earthly vineyard labor to bring in the harvest. They gather the ripe fruit and bring it to be combined together in the winepress. In the same way, Jesus wants to gather all into one; and He wants us to work in this divided world to bring others to unity in him. The work of God on earth bringing all to redemption is designed to be shared - Christianity is not a spectator sport. So many times in scripture Our Lord has told us about the needs to worship and serve God, to show charity to our neighbor, to care for others, to spread the Gospel. He calls us to be his partners and friends, he forms a Church, he asks us to bear his yoke. God has intended that doing this work of bringing all together is an expectation of his followers. It's an invitation with a promise attached. But, the Master in the story doesn't say: "Hey go on down to my house and have a lemonade and relax - I'll be by later with the pay." He says he will give what is just and fair - and God's justice demands that we work with him to receive what he has to offer.

But we have to be careful about how we understand that. Receiving this promise is not about just making a single acclamation of faith and your all set. God makes many moral demands through history that involve action beyond lip service. Jesus says that those who do certain things will go to eternal life and those who don't will go to eternal punishment. We hear in the second letter to the Corinthians: *For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad.* Yes it's not a free ride! Paul knows that the pathway to the promises

goes along a road that demands work and sacrifice, he says in the second reading today: *If I go on living in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me.* What we do matters. But we also have to be careful: it is not right to think that we can earn our salvation. It's not that we work and then we now deserve - and are entitled to - the reward. We cannot earn eternal life - the only way is to accept the free invitation to go to the vineyard and work - and the way to lose it is to fail to respond to the invitation. The faith we profess is given substance in action, the love we speak about is somehow empty without doing and sacrificing for the other. The relationship with God that opens us up to eternal life is one of love and commitment.

The parable shows the commitment on our side is to go to the vineyard of the world. But it is tempting to think: "if I can be put on the same footing as someone who has served God their whole life if I just follow God for six months - then what's the rush?" I can just wait for the last second, give up what I am not going to use anyway before I die, and go full in on my last week. Two problems with that plan: First, when we go down the path of the worldly, when we ignore our duties to God and neighbor for long enough - we don't find our way back. I know many people for whom ignoring God's ways has become such a habit there is no turning back, and they have long forgot about God and stopped listening to the invitation. Second problem: you don't know when you are going to die. You can't really time this thing as well as we think we could. When I hear today's parable, I always wonder about the guys in the marketplace in the parable who didn't go at the last invitation - I wonder if they knew that was their last chance? God doesn't go away from us, but in our selfishness and going our own way, we can pull back from God and create a space between us and God. This is the danger of waiting. We must seek God before the distance becomes too great and we can't find the way back. As we heard in the first reading: *Seek the Lord while He may be found, call to him while he is still near.*

God is there calling. And so many in the world aren't listening - and, honestly, sometimes we are not listening too well either. God has the reward and is generous enough to grant it to all who respond. Will we respond more than give lip service? Will we take the time to reach out to the many who are deaf to the voice and encourage them to respond? If you think it is too late to respond - think about the parable and the late comers - and *Seek the Lord while He may be found.* Better to be one of those who joined the effort late than those who never get there.