

September 20, 2020 Go Into My Vineyard Homily: In the Academy award motion picture, *“On the Waterfront”*, there is one compelling scene involving the story’s young hero, Terry Malloy, a washed up pugilist. Whispered to be a government witness against the mob-controlled union on the New Jersey and New York waterfronts, he turns up early one morning with his fellow dock workers, hoping to earn a single day’s wage. Since the mob viewed him as a “stool pigeon” and a “snitch”, he is the only one passed over for work. He is shut out. He stands alone without even the moral support of his friends. He is left to take on the corrupt union virtually alone.

In today’s parable of the workers in the vineyard (Mt. 20: 1-16) no fewer than five times does the owner of the vineyard go out in search of workers. Clearly the owner represents the God of Israel. He will not rest until everyone in sight has been gathered together in the crew working in the vineyard. The owner is compassionate and generous to a fault. There is always a place in the vineyard for anyone willing to work. Lack of experience and the late of the day are inconsequential. Bear in mind that day laborers in the cultural world of Jesus were at the bottom of the economic ladder and worked for minimum wage. They are akin to migrants workers in our own day. According to the Mosaic Law, wages had to be paid out on a daily basis. It was required that hired help be given the earnings by sundown at the end of each work day.

When Pope Benedict XVI addressed the crowd of pilgrims on the day of his election, he introduced himself as a simple laborer in the Lord’s vineyard. To be in the Lord’s service is a divine gift and an undeserved honor. It is difficult to conceive of a greater blessing!

What lessons can we derive from today’s gospel?

God’s ways are utterly different from human thinking. God is not like us who are prone to envy and anger. His love is entirely generous. In words from our first reading from the prophet Isaiah: “My thoughts are not your thoughts nor are my ways your ways”;

As payment for a day’s work the laborer was handed a small coin, a denarius. Each one of the workers received the one coin. For many of the Church fathers, the denarius represents eternal life. All have the same share. In his reflections on this parable Saint Augustine writes: “Where eternal life is concerned, there can be no question of more or less for anyone”;

Lastly, the parable teaches us that many find faith or re-discover Christ at the finish line or as the sun begins to set. We have the perfect example in the so-called “Good Thief” who turned to the crucified Christ while dying on the cross. He took advantage of the opportunity, his last, to save his own soul. Our Lord was quick to show him mercy.

A more recent example is that of the notorious mobster, “Dutch Schultz”, who was public enemy number one during the period of the American depression in the late twenties and early thirties of the last century. A gambler, extortionist, bootlegger and murderer, he was the victim of a gangland shooting, and was gravely wounded in the surprise attack. Only hours before his death he requested that a Catholic priest he had met in prison visit him at the hospital where he was a patient. Upon his arrival Dutch asked that the priest baptize him. The priest gladly acceded to his request. After the

mobster's death the public turned against the priest for administering the sacrament to a known killer. They wanted him to rot in hell.

How sad!

In an article he wrote for *"America"* magazine after the death of Dutch Schultz in 1935, the Jesuit priest Father John Toomey wrote: "There is just one in the entire universe who is capable of accurately judging the complex skein of a man's life. The influence of bad example, of environment in general: of heredity; the lack of religious training; the exact strength of temptations... that One is God Almighty. No one else can even begin to do the job".

In these troubling times of unbelief, increasing violence and gross immorality, we may see in ourselves the character of Terry Malloy. We stand virtually alone, and without the moral support of so many of the baptized, in confronting the evils of our day. The temptation is to be idle and refuse Our Lord's invitation to labor in the vineyard of the world. It may not seem worth the effort. Our lives may be at risk. But refusing to respond to God's gracious call is one of life's greatest tragedies. Far too many have chosen to be idle and not work.

One of Our Lord's most haunting questions is addressed to many of us today: "Why do you stand here idle all day?" (Mt. 20:6)

Amen!