

**20<sup>th</sup> Wednesday of Ordinary Time I 2003**  
**Memorial of Saint Bernard, abbot and doctor of the Church**  
**August 20, 2003**

[Jdgs 9:6-15](#)

All the citizens of Shechem and all Beth-millo came together and proceeded to make Abimelech king by the terebinth at the memorial pillar in Shechem.

When this was reported to him,  
Jotham went to the top of Mount Gerizim and, standing there,  
cried out to them in a loud voice:  
"Hear me, citizens of Shechem, that God may then hear you!  
Once the trees went to anoint a king over themselves.  
So they said to the olive tree, 'Reign over us.'  
But the olive tree answered them, 'Must I give up my rich oil,  
whereby men and gods are honored,  
and go to wave over the trees?'  
Then the trees said to the fig tree, 'Come; you reign over us!'  
But the fig tree answered them,  
'Must I give up my sweetness and my good fruit,  
and go to wave over the trees?'  
Then the trees said to the vine, 'Come you, and reign over us.'  
But the vine answered them,  
'Must I give up my wine that cheers gods and men,  
and go to wave over the trees?'  
Then all the trees said to the buckthorn, 'Come; you reign over us!'  
But the buckthorn replied to the trees,  
'If you wish to anoint me king over you in good faith,  
come and take refuge in my shadow.  
Otherwise, let fire come from the buckthorn  
and devour the cedars of Lebanon.'"

[Mt 20:1-16](#)

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,  
he 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,  
he 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.  
And on receiving it they grumbled against the landowner, saying,  
'These last ones worked only one hour,  
and you have made them equal to us,  
who bore the day's burden and the heat.'  
He said to one of them in reply,  
'My friend, I am not cheating you.  
Did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage?  
Take what is yours and go.  
What if I wish to give this last one the same as you?  
Or am I not free to do as I wish with my own money?'"

Are you envious because I am generous?  
Thus, the last will be first, and the first will be last."

This king story needs a little background. Abimelech was one of 70 sons of Gideon. Abimelech seized power by killing all of Gideon's sons except Jotham who escaped. This passage shows Jotham on a mountain top. At this period of time, Israel had been led by Judges- heads of clans. The people were clamoring for a king. Jotham does not have a high opinion of kings in general and certainly not of his evil brother. In Jotham's mountain top story (mountain top stories are significant), the olive tree, fig tree and vine all beg off as they were created to serve as God designed them. The buckthorn, who is a bit nasty, wants the power and starts setting down the rules. We hear the false promise of shade from a ground cover offered to the trees. Not much refuge, but a lot of self-service: a lesson for us in a democracy who chose our leaders.

A parable is more than an allegory to figure out a deeper meaning. Parables are meant to startle our natural sense of things. When you hear Jesus' parables, I ask you to examine your startledness and allow the Spirit to work with it. Then look again to the words for understanding.

Our society shares the same sense of "fairness" as the laborers who started at 9:00 A.M. When I am "fair" to you, that ensures that I get mine. God's generosity is not predicated on such selfishness. His is of total gift, regardless of the deservedness of the receiver. How fortunate for us as we see

how undeserving we are. We can only joyfully receive our Father's generosity.