

God's ways are not our ways

Twenty-fifth Sunday of the Year – Cycle A – September 20, 2020

Readings: Isa 55:6-9; Phil 1:20-24, 27; Mt 20:1-16

“My ways are not your ways – it is the Lord who speaks” (Isa 55:8)

Prologue: We normally judge people with our own Manmade binaries of good-versus-bad; saint-over-sinner; meritorious-against-unmeritorious; fair-versus-unfair. However, God is beyond all this and God's generosity and mercy are not only incomparable but also scarcely understandable by us, humans, who are so calculative, conditional and condemnatory of others. The readings urge us to see and act as God, not Man, does.

Three Scriptural Signposts:

1. The Prophet (second-Isaiah) speaks words of comfort to his people in Exile sometime after the middle of the 6th century BC on behalf of Yahweh: God. He tells them to “Seek the Lord ... and call upon him while he is near” (v.6). The “seeking” here refers to turning to God with humility. Making them aware of their sinfulness and their straying away from God, the prophet exhorts them to return to God with repentant hearts, for God “will abundantly pardon” their sins (v.7). He then reminds them that, though they are created in the image and likeness of God, there is an inestimable difference between the way God views reality and acts and the way that human beings do. God reminds us: “My ways and not your ways, my thoughts are not your thoughts!” (v.8). Truly, who can fathom God's mind and the manner in which God deals with us, God's children?
2. God's mysterious yet marvelous way of dealing with human beings is seen in today's ‘parable of the generous landowner’ found only in Matthew's gospel. It is narrated in the context of Jesus' promise of reward to his disciples — when Peter asks Jesus: “Look, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?” (19:27). In reply, Jesus assures him that that they “will receive a hundredfold, and will inherit eternal life” (19:29) but with a caveat: “many who are first will be last, and the last will be first” (19:30). Through this parable, then, he shows them how God's ways are very different from ours. Jesus' disciples must have surely been aware of the pathetic plight of daily wage labourers waiting to be hired, while facing the very real prospect of returning home unhired, moneyless. These poor workers had no land of their own and thus depended on the largesse of landlords to hire them and pay them enough to quite literally buy their ‘*daily bread*’. All of these labourers—whether employed at the first, third, sixth, ninth or eleventh hour—were needy, since all were poor and had many mouths to feed. Moreover, all wanted to work but couldn't, since, in their own words, “no one has hired us” (v.7). A denarius was a just wage for a day's work, and would just about be enough to support a family's basic needs; anything less—and especially payment for a single hour—would have been totally inadequate. Sensing their will to work and surmising their needs, the landowner not only hires them, but also gives them what is, legally, a just wage: a denarius. Had he given anything less, he would have been ‘just’ by worldly, calculative standards; but the workers would never have been able to make both ends meet.
3. Treating everyone as being equally in need and therefore paying everyone the same wage without any consideration of how long they worked, is perceived by those who came first

and worked longer as injustice. They grumble. The grumblers actually contest not the landowner's skewed sense of justice, but his astounding generosity. The landowner calls these grumblers "friends," and explains, "I'm not being unjust to you; did we not agree on one denarius?" Indeed, he had honoured his part of the labour contract by paying them not only what was agreed upon but also what was a just wage for their work of that day. Anyone seeking work would have been happy to get a denarius. The parable isn't simply about life, but about the 'kingdom of heaven'. God alone will decide who is to be honoured in heaven. The landowner coolly asks: "Have I no right to do what I like with my own? Why be jealous because I'm generous?" With these challenging questions remaining unanswered, Jesus ends the parable repeating the same punchline used earlier: "the last will be first, and the first will be last" (v.16). Obviously, he narrates this parable in the context of the 'early workers', the Pharisees, who were furious to see the 'latecomers'—namely, the tax collectors, harlots and sinners—repenting and regarded as heirs of heaven. In his ministry, Jesus was giving his contemporaries a foretaste of the gratuitousness of God's love.

Linking the Psalm and the 2nd Reading to the Theme: The responsorial psalm proclaims, "The Lord is good to *all*" (Ps 145:9) and "The Lord is just in all his ways, and kind in all his doings" (v.17). God is truly a generous Parent to *all* people. However, just as a family specially cares for its handicapped members, so does God apply a 'principle of difference' in dealing with the disadvantaged and dispossessed of the kingdom. Paul's words to the Christians at Philippi are written from prison in the midst of manifold suffering. He does not view his possible, imminent death in a morbid way but as an occasion to be totally united with God. However, should God want him to continue working—i.e., to "remain in the flesh" (v.22)—he would gladly obey God's will, for Christ was the be all and the end all of his life.

Two Contextual Challenges:

The Last will be First Challenge: While Jesus' "last will be first and first will be last" axiom sounds logical and acceptable in theory, many so-called 'original' Christians are unhappy about so-called 'converted' Christians being given church benefits equal to what they receive.

The Communist Challenge: The Marxian maxim: "*From* each according to his ability, *to* each according to his needs," seems similar to Jesus' logic in the parable. Could it be possible that many Communists/Marxists practise Christ's gospels more radically than I do?

In Lighter Vein: A holier-than-thou self-righteous priest, Fr. Pious, reached the Pearly Gates after death and was surprised to see—according to him—his most unworthy parishioners: drunkards, womanizers, atheists and sinners of all hues. Heaven seemed overcrowded with the scum of society; hell, by contrast, seemed quite empty. Irrked by God's leniency, Fr. Pious protested. To pacify him, God told St Peter to reexamine all those already admitted into heaven, whereupon Peter read the Ten Commandments aloud, saying: "Those who have broken these commandments shall dissociate themselves from this celestial company and descend to hell!" As Peter read the commandments, one by one, people confessed their guilt and disappeared. When the fifth commandment was read, few were left, and after the sixth, everyone went to hell except Fr. Pious. Feeling lonely, God said, "Tell them all to come back!" Pious grumbled, "O God, that's unfair! Why didn't you tell me this before?" God reminds us: "Are you jealous because I'm generous? My ways are not your ways." Thank God!
