

Our Sunday Readings

ISAIAH 55:6-9
 PSALM 145:2-3,8-9,17-18
 PHILIPPIANS 1:20c-24,27a
 MATTHEW 20:1-16

Generous Ways

ISAIAH 55:6-9

Reading closely

1. How should people seek the LORD?
2. What sort of ways and thoughts must people abandon?
3. Why should people turn away from sin right now?
4. How might this passage have challenged the people who first heard it?
5. How might people have reacted to these words?
6. Do you think people thought of God as merciful and generous in forgiving?

Living the word

7. What differences have you noticed between your ways and God's ways?
8. How does this passage challenge you?
9. How does it reassure you?

*For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
nor are your ways my ways...*

THE FIRST READING

God's hidden plans

In the sixth century BC Israel was invaded by the Babylonians. They destroyed Jerusalem and its temple and forced hundreds of Israelites to live in Babylon. About fifty years later King Cyrus of Persia conquered Babylon and released those held in captivity. The Exile seemed to destroy God's chosen people, but Isaiah and others perceived this event as part of God's plan to save his people from their sinfulness (vv.8-9).

Rebuild!

Verse 6 is better translated: "Seek the LORD where he may be found..." For Jews, the holiest place on earth was their temple, the one place God dwelled, so to speak. The prophet declares that the time has come to rebuild the temple so that the Israelites can again know the fullness of God's presence (v.6). The LORD has forgiven his people for the sins that led to the Exile. Once the temple is rebuilt, everyone who turns away from sin will be allowed to enter it (v.7).

MATTHEW 20:1-16

Read vv.1-2. Imagine you're one of the laborers.

1. What's it like to work in a vineyard?
2. When does your day usually start and end?
3. Do you usually do this kind of work?
4. How do you feel by the end of the day?
5. How do you feel when people show up hours later to work alongside you?
6. What do you expect to be paid?
7. What is your opinion of the landowner?

Read vv.3-9. Imagine you're hired late in the day.

8. Why weren't you hired earlier?
9. How does it feel to be hired?
10. Do you have any family responsibilities?
11. How do the other laborers treat you?
12. Do all the laborers work at the same pace?
13. How much do expect to get paid?
14. What is your opinion of the landowner?

Read vv.10-16. Imagine you're the landowner.

15. Why do you keep hiring people?
16. Why do you pay everyone the same wage?
17. What do the people you hired last say to you when you pay them?
18. How do you feel when the other workers grumble?
19. Do you make the same choices in the future?
20. What insights does this parable offer you?

THE GOSPEL READING

Fair wages

The landowner agrees to pay the customary amount for a full day's work. His decision to pay the late-comers first creates drama in the story. Those who were hired first now expect a bonus despite their initial agreement with the landowner.

Stingy hearts

The landowner acts so generously that some people claim he isn't being fair. As the employer points out, however, he honors his agreement with the first people he hired. Compared to him these people seem selfish and uncaring.

This parable, unique to Matthew, is similar to the story of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32). The landowner is like the father who loves both his sons, even when the older brother gets angry at his father for forgiving the younger one.

An independent saying

The parable is bracketed with a saying that doesn't quite apply (19:30; 20:16). The moment of reversal is a minor part of the story. Moreover, the saying indicates that people who don't seem worthy of God's kingdom will enter it before those who seem worthy, whereas the parable indicates that everyone can be part of God's kingdom no matter when they show up.

Undeserving

One way to interpret the parable is through the lens of Jesus' association with sinners. The sinners are the workers employed later in the day. The Pharisees and other good Jews are those hired first. Pious Jews may resent the inclusion of sinners in God's kingdom, but God welcomes both.

The parable is also a warning to those who expect a reward for their piety or good works. Right before this passage Peter asks what the disciples will receive for having given up everything (19:27). The parable suggests that the rewards of following Jesus are so great that they exceed what anyone could deserve. No one earns a place in God's glorious reign. Despite all we do, life with God is a gift.

PRAYER

by St. Ignatius of Loyola

Lord,
 teach me to be generous.
 Teach me to serve you as you deserve –
 to give and not to count the cost,
 to fight and not to heed the wounds,
 to toil and not to seek for rest,
 to labor and not to ask for reward,
 save that of knowing that I do your will.
 Amen.