

The Last Shall Be First

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September 20, 2020 – Twenty-Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Readings: Isaiah 55.6-9; Philippians 1.20-24; Matthew 20.1-16

At this time when our Jewish brothers and sisters are celebrating a new year, our Mass readings offer us a vision of personal renewal. We are invited to conform our lives more deeply to the gospel (per Phil 1.27) so that we might experience the fullness of God’s mercy and, through it, the reward he promises to the laborers in his vineyard.

Our Gospel reading from Matthew 20, the Parable of the Vineyard, constitutes a continuation of Jesus’s discourse from the previous chapter concerning the kingdom of heaven (see Matt 19.23ff), with specific reference to the Last Judgment. In Matthew 19, Peter had asked Jesus what the reward would be for the disciples who had given up everything to follow him (Matt 19.27). Jesus responded by describing how the disciples, and by extension all who have made a sincere gift of self to God, will sit in judgment—that is, disseminating God’s own judgment—of “the twelve tribes of Israel,” that is, the whole of the people whom God has chosen for himself (Matt 19.28; see also *S.T.* supp. Q. 89, a. 4; *G.S.* 4). Although Jesus said that “everyone” who has made a significant personal sacrifice for him would “inherit eternal life” (Matt 19.29), he added (v. 30) that “many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.”

We should picture those last words hanging in the air, then, as we reflect upon the Parable of the Vineyard, as the parable comprises Jesus’s personal illustration of how there is an order or hierarchy of saints in heaven.

Late Arrivals in the Vineyard

This parable, like all parables, describes a mystery of the Kingdom of God (see Luke 8.10). As such, its meaning is multivalent; no single interpretation can be assigned to it that excludes all others. Nonetheless, given what Sacred Scripture tells us about the social circumstances of the early Church, it is reasonable to assume that this parable had particular relevance for Matthew’s audience of Jewish Christians—which is also the audience that Jesus himself is addressing, given that all the apostles were Jewish.

Readers formed in Jewish thought would have recognized the vineyard as “the house of Israel” (Isa 5.7). With that in mind, they would have understood the laborers hired at dawn to be the people to whom God chose to reveal himself—the “twelve tribes” Jesus had just mentioned (Matt 19.28), understood as progressing through the “hours” of salvation history.

Following that same analogy, Jesus’s disciples would have understood the laborers hired later in the day as people who had become part of Israel through conversion to Judaism. The allusion to converts would have caused the disciples’ ears to perk up, for conversion was a topic of heated debate among the Pharisees of Jesus’s time. Whereas many held with Hillel, who supported proselytizing, a growing number held with Hillel’s younger contemporary Shammai, who took a hostile attitude towards would-be converts to Judaism (Epstein).

The witness of Jewish scripture itself reflects a range of perspectives on conversion. On the one hand is Ruth, who accepted Judaism through her act of allegiance to her Jewish mother-in-law Naomi (Ruth 1.16-17), who is upheld as a model of Jewish womanhood. Not even the Shammaites would have dared speak against her.

On the other is the “mixed multitude” that accompanied the Israelites from Egypt (Exod 12.38), who is viewed with suspicion. Leviticus records an incident in which a member of this mixed multitude, “a man born of an Israelite mother and an Egyptian father,” curses the Lord during a fight with an Israelite man; for this, the community stones him for blasphemy. In Nehemiah, all those of mixed descent are expelled from Israel (Neh 13.3).

Interestingly, the Hebrew phrase in Exodus 12.38 that is translated “mixed multitude,” *‘erev rav*, can also be translated as “great evening (Zucker).” This alternate meaning led the author of the *Zohar*, the medieval text on Kabbalah, to speculate that the phrase referred to converts to Judaism from a class of Egyptian magicians who worked during the waning of the sun, “which is called ‘the great evening’” (*Zohar* 2.191a, quoted in Zucker) —but which would actually be from twelve-thirty to three-thirty in the afternoon. However, the *Zohar*, as with many other early and medieval Jewish commentaries concerning the mixed multitude, does not take a kind view to these magician converts; it blames them for compelling Aaron to make the Golden Calf (Zucker).

Although the Parable of the Vineyard precedes the *Zohar* commentary by more than a millennium, it is not inconceivable that Jesus’s listeners who had studied Torah would have been conscious of the verbal similarity between the Hebrew words for “mixed multitude” and “great evening.” They might therefore have taken a special interest in Jesus’s description of the laborers whom the landowner hired at late hours of the day—recognizing in them a specific allusion to the prospective converts shunned by Shammai Pharisees.

Perhaps nowhere else in scripture are the tensions between different Jewish traditions concerning conversion most vividly on display than in Isaiah, whence comes our first reading.

The first part of Isaiah, written prior to the exile into Babylon, envisions gentiles becoming Israelites’ slaves (Isa 14.2), whereas the second, written during the exile, appears to permit them entrance into Israel if they observe Jewish purity laws (Isa 52.1; see Douglas, 124). Most dramatic is the prophecy relayed in the third, postexilic portion of Isaiah, the final chapter of which prophesies that gentiles will enter into the Levitical priesthood (Douglas, 124). Given that Jesus, as we have seen, draws his vineyard imagery from Isaiah, it is fitting that the message of his parable comports with Isaiah’s ultimate vision, in which the last to enter Israel gain the priestly reward that was promised to the first—for God himself is the Levites’ inheritance (Deut 18.1).

Whereas Jesus’s listeners saw themselves as the workers hired at dawn, we hear the Parable of the Vineyard from a different perspective when it is read in the Church. For us, the vineyard is not merely the house of Israel according to the flesh; it is also “the new Israel which . . . is called the Church of Christ” (*L.G.* 9).

Given that, after Jesus’s time, the Church gained most of its members from outside the Jewish world, most Catholics who hear the Parable of the Vineyard are in the place of the workers hired during the afternoon or evening hours. This is true even granting that the Church has lasted for two thousand years. God began to reveal himself to the people of Israel more than one thousand years before Christ. In fact, on the Jewish calendar, the new year that has just begun is 5781—counting from what was traditionally believed to be the year that the world was created.

Serving in the Final Hours

Understanding ourselves as the last-hired workers can help us gain humility and guard against the pride that Jesus warns against when he says, later in Matthew 20, that true greatness lies not in being served but in serving (Matt 20.25-28). A story of a person of our time who followed the path of humility to holiness can serve as an example.

The person I have in mind is a woman who felt called to assist prisoners at La Mesa Prison in Tijuana, Mexico. La Mesa, a concrete structure the size of two city blocks, was—until it was shut down in 2002 by Mexican President Vicente Fox—known as “El Pueblito”—the little town—because it was hard to tell where Tijuana ended and the prison began. The gang members imprisoned there were running the place. According to one news report, it was “filled with restaurants, brothels, and drugs” (Taylor).

“Inmates paid for their cells,” the report adds, with some paying \$20,000 for a new cell with all the necessary accoutrements. “The bathrooms of these cells were tiled and had Jacuzzis installed. Prisoners owned cell phones, DVD players, microwaves, computers, and air conditioners” (Taylor).

No one, however, would have confused La Mesa with a swanky Las Vegas resort. A human-rights group called it Mexico's worst prison because of overcrowding and favoritism towards wealthy prisoners. There were no beds for poor inmates; some had no other option but to sleep on the basketball court (Jordan).

In the midst of this crowded, drug-ridden, gang-ruled compound, inside a 10' by 10' concrete room with few belongings beyond a cot, a Bible, and Spanish dictionary, there lived for many years a little woman in a white habit. The inmates called her Mother Antonia, but she was not Mexican; her real name was Mary Brenner (née Clarke). She came from an Irish-American family in Beverly Hills and was a twice-divorced mother of eight children, including one who died in infancy.

Mother Antonia was fifty years old when, in 1977, she felt the call to leave her comfortable life behind to devote herself fully to ministering to the prisoners at La Mesa, where she had long provided aid as a volunteer. *The New York Times* upon her death in 2013 summed up a few of the ways she assisted prisoners in their physical and spiritual needs, saying she gave them "aspirin, blankets, toiletries and prescription eyeglasses. She sang in worship services. She received a prison contract to sell soda to prisoners and used the proceeds to bail out low-level offenders. If a prisoner died, of illness or in a gang fight, she prepared him for burial" (Yardley).

Ten years before her death, Mother Antonia founded a religious congregation for women who, like herself, heard the call late in life to give up everything to serve Jesus in the poor and suffering. She called the congregation the Eudist Servants of the Eleventh Hour and it continues its mission into the present day (see Eudist Servants website).

Let us pray that we, like Mother Antonia and her Eudist Servants, may make an ever-greater gift of ourselves to God even as the hours of our day grow fewer.

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For Further Reading

- *St. Thomas Aquinas, S.T. [Supp., Q. 89, a. 1](#)*
- *A.P. Douglas, "[Torah from Zion: Gentile Conversion and Law Observance in the Septuagint of Isaiah](#)"*
- *L. J. Epstein, "[Conversion History: Ancient Period](#)"*
- *[Eudist Servants](#)*
- *[Gaudium et spes \(G.S.\)](#)*
- *M. Jordan, "[Mexico Cleans up Notorious Prison](#)"*
- *[Lumen gentium \(L.G.\)](#)*
- *O. Taylor, "[10 Prisons That Are Not What We Expect](#),"*
- *W. Yardley, "[Antonia Brenner, 'Prison Angel' Who Took Inmates Under Her Wing, is Dead at 86](#)"*
- *D. J. Zucker, "[Erev Rav: A Mixed Multitude of Meanings](#)"*

In Short . . .

- *The Parable of the Vineyard is a means that Jesus uses to explain how it is that "many who are first will be last, and the last will be first" (Matt 19.30).*
- *Jesus's Jewish listeners would have recognized that the vineyard represents "the house of Israel" (Isa 5.7).*
- *For us living today, the vineyard represents not merely Israel according to the flesh but also "the new Israel which . . . is called the Church of Christ" (L.G. 9).*
- *Catholics are, in comparison with the Jewish people, the workers hired later in the day.*
- *We should seek to gain through this parable the virtue of humility.*