

Fr James' homily for the Twenty-Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time

First Reading: Isaiah 55:6-9
Second Reading: Philippians 1:20-27
Gospel: Matthew 20:1-16



What is the Church for? This creaky and fragile institution founded by Jesus Christ, God with us? You know the classic answer that I always give to this question: The Church exists to make forgiveness possible. But this is only part of it and today's Gospel and great parable of what-the-Kingdom-of-God-is-like tell us about this. The Church exists to enable us to become intimate with God and know him in a way that we cannot do just by ourselves, important though that is.

The twist is that we might not achieve that intimacy with God, that understanding of him, in the Church either! As always, the parable is one that we might hear in a particular and misguided way. We could very well sympathise with the workers who have worked all day. We could agree with them that they have been exploited and if that is as far as our thinking goes then we could effectively just be going through the motions of religion without being converted. Or we could admire the good fortune of those who appeared late in the day and took home all the prizes too. And admiring them means we somehow take God for granted and expect salvation from him because we are such decent people and deserve no less, thank you very much.

All of these attitudes are sad. Jesus is giving us the chance to see how vast is the mercy and the purposes of God; how great is his love and care for every part of his creation. Jesus' invitation is, of course, to change our way of thinking, to use the opportunities we have to grow in virtue and spirit and friendship with God. To give up making God a sort of rival, and looking at others over our shoulders too. This is only fully possible within the grace of his Church.

The extraordinarily rich vein of Holy Scripture that is chapters 40 - 55 of the Prophet Isaiah speak of this subject, as we hear in the first reading today. In this *Year of the Word* these would be very good chapters to explore. "*My thoughts are not your thoughts...my ways are not your ways*". In other words, God is not like us, not a creature, a thing in the world - rather he IS the creator, he simply IS. And yet we tend to think we can teach God a thing or two, or that he owes us something.

The mystery of God is utterly beyond our comprehension...and yet Isaiah implores us to seek him, for he is near, and these chapters of the Prophet Isaiah tell us paradoxically that God is also infinitely close to us. This we know is fulfilled in Jesus and in the friendship with God we come to in the Church. It is what we truly want.

A good example of how this works out is that universal experience of pain and suffering. I touch on it too briefly here just to put an idea in our heads. “Why am I permitted to go through this?” we ask, whatever the situation may be. Can we grasp that no matter what the circumstances, God has some purpose of redemption in it? To turn bad to good? To do so takes much practice of faith; it is the truth we see in the Cross. How does a parent explain to a small child the need for a difficult medical procedure? The child would want to avoid it, and cannot see the bigger scene and probably questions the parent. So we question God. “God’s thoughts” should give us pause for thought and for opportunity in all things.

When Jesus says to us “The last will be first and the first last” he is saying that with God there is always an opportunity, and always an opportunity for us to miss. When we are genuinely open to his grace then all is possible, even at the last moment and in the worst circumstances. When we reduce God to a sort of service provider in an eternity of our own invention, we put ourselves in the last place, and indeed God now becomes rather boring. The wonder though, as Jesus says in his parable, is that God still calls us “friend” even then. What does that tell us? No better time to join the dots than today!

Amen.

Fr James and Fr Tom wish you a blessed Sunday. Keep safe and well, and never hesitate to pick up the telephone and be in touch. See you in church I hope! Keep in close contact with the website for news of how practical plans are developing.