

25th Sunday (A)

21st September 2014

'The 11th hour'

Is 55: *our God is rich in forgiving* Ps 144: *The Lord is kind and full of compassion*

Phil 1: *Life to me is Christ; death would bring me more*

Mt 20: 1–16: *"Why be envious because I am generous?"*

Working as a hospital chaplain as I did for several years before coming to Hoddesdon, this Gospel passage most naturally speaks to me of death-bed conversions. It isn't such a rare event, that, faced with a serious illness or even impending death, some who have long abandoned the practice of their faith, take the opportunity for sincere and genuine reconciliation: confession and Holy Communion, perhaps after many years.

This is just the sort of thing Christ is talking about, I think, when he speaks of the labourers whom the landowner hired at the 11th hour (5pm). He kept returning to the market place to find workers: dawn, 3rd hour, 6th hour, 9th hour, 11th hour. He didn't give up by the middle of the day. Even just an hour before evening He finds more labourers to work in His vineyard.

An 11th-hr invitation in Jesus's actual life that we will all recognise is that made from the Cross to the thief.

This crucified man who had presumably lived a criminal life, and was, as he admitted, receiving just punishment for his crimes, turns to the Lord at the 11th hr — in fact, much later than the 11th hr — to appeal for forgiveness. We all know the response of Jesus: "Today, you will be with Me in Paradise." Maybe it's because we don't really tend to think about this man's past life that we aren't as offended by this generosity of God as we are by the 11th-hr workers. Yet it represents the same logic of the Lord: inviting to return; to offer constantly the gift of life to anyone ready with ears to hear.

The Lord keeps returning to call us too. He doesn't get tired of making that insistent call to us: that we may be converted and full of heart start working for His kingdom. It's never too late. Sometimes I come across the lapsed who say it is too late for them ... but that attitude is shown to be completely wrong by those instead who come back full of joy and gratitude. Some people have just never had the courage — or never been asked — to come back. We should bear that in mind! Invite people back to the Lord!

Help them back — make it as easy as possible for someone to have the chance to come back. Introduce them to a priest, recommend one, accompany them, help them know of the Lord's mercy. He never shuts the door. Just like the landowner, coming out to the market place time and time again, God keeps on the lookout, and keeps inviting: "Why have you not come in all this time? No-one has hired us." No-one has asked us!

Note the gripes of those who had worked a long hard day in all the heat: why does he not treat us better? But the fact is, he simply is looking to give life to all. That '1 denarius' agreed rate was a day's living wage: he would not give each one less than he could live on. God simply wishes the fullness of life for each one of us; for each person on the face of the earth. That life can only come through Jesus Christ, whom we embrace by humbly confessing our sins, and then receiving the immense graces of His sacraments, most especially in the food for our souls, His own divine life in the Eucharist.

If we believe and live this, then we will be

continually inviting to the Lord, or inviting back to the Lord, those we know of who do not know and love Him. This is our labouring in His vineyard: our working for the kingdom. Never regret that you have worked for the Kingdom long and hard in your life: whether from daybreak, or from the 3rd or 6th hour of your life ... Never have a gripe that others may join, or be reconciled, late in life: instead, rejoice that they have had the chance and the courage to do so. Perhaps if you hadn't worked long and hard from the beginning, they couldn't have been reconciled at the 11th hour. So: you were made to belong to the Kingdom; work for it with all your heart and all your strength. And welcome with joy those even who hear the call to be with the Lord at the last moment. The angels rejoice in heaven over one repentant sinner: so should we!