

25th Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)
(Isaiah 55:6-9 / Matthew 20:1-16)
24.09.2023
My ways...

The parable we heard in today's Gospel reading may be the best illustration of the Lord's words recorded in the prophet Isaiah: "My thoughts are not your thoughts, my ways not your ways."

Often our thoughts and our ways do not agree with God's. We must acknowledge that, spontaneously, we would side with the workers who arrived at the first hour; in the same way, in the parable of the prodigal son (Lk 15:11-32), many would probably defend the elder son; and who would have been as generous as Peter in suggesting that we must forgive as many as seven times (Mt 18:21-22)?

The point here is that the parable we heard is not an exception, the fact is that all the Gospels are unanimous in challenging our human ways of thinking and acting.

The Lord's life and message call into question our old, self-reliant and self-centred ways and invite us to relate to God, to others and to ourselves in a new way, according to the Good News of love and life.

The parable of the vineyard labourers specifically challenges three images of God which are very common and which need to be converted:

- the first image is that of a God seated above waiting for us to come to him. The landowner of the parable makes the effort to go out at the 3rd, 6th, 9th and 11th hours in order to look for new workers. So the Lord comes to us respectfully, yet unceasingly and persistently. As St John Henry Newman reminds us: "For in truth we are not called once only, but many times; all through our life Christ is calling us. (...) He calls us again and again, in order to justify us again and again, – and again and again, and more and more, to sanctify and glorify us." (*Serm.* 2) As St Teresa of Calcutta used to say: "The Lord thirsts for us." The truth that is so difficult for us to grasp is that the Lord loves us like a beggar and that he loves us so much that he looks for us before we look for him.

While we may be quick to give up on somebody or on certain groups of people, those with whom we do not agree and those on the margins, the Lord never gives up on anyone. He continues to go out looking for all at every hour of the day.

- the second image that needs to be challenged is that God can be more or less present here or there, that he can give himself to us more or less according to his mood or to our merits.

God is and because he is, he is totally present and he gives himself unreservedly to all. The problem is not on his side but on ours, we are not present to him and not open enough to his generosity.

In the Bible, God is the one who is present to and for his people. According to Martin Buber – a famous 20th century Jewish philosopher – the best translation for the Hebrew text: "I am who I am" (Ex 3:14) is: "I will be present as the one who will be there."

From the beginning and until the end, God is not only a being, but he is a being who is present to his creation, to each one of us. The whole biblical revelation is about God patiently reminding his people that he is there with them, that he is with us. The revelation process reaches his peak in the Incarnation when God reveals himself as "God-is-with-us" in Jesus Christ (Mt 1:23).

- the third aspect challenged by the parable is our too human view of justice, a view that we tend to impose on God. The landowner of the parable is clear: "I am not being unjust to you" because I am generous.

Let us not be mistaken about Jesus' intentions: his parable is not a political manifesto on workers' wages. Jesus is not advocating that everybody should receive the same wages, that would be deeply unjust. What the parable aims at is to reveal God's generosity and the fact that his justice is always accompanied by patience, mercy and generosity. Pope Francis reminds us that: "The heart of the Father goes beyond our little concept of justice to open us to the limitless horizons of his mercy." (General Audience, 03.02.2016)

Because God is mercy as much as he is just, we must review our image of God as a judge unmoved by our plea for mercy or ignorant of the wounds and limitations that make us fall on the way.

God longs for us and comes to us; God is present and totally given in Jesus Christ; God is mercy and generosity.

The parable which the Church invites to meditate upon is a huge challenge to all the times when we turn the God of Jesus Christ into a petty idol. We have to be careful because we become what we worship and often we become narrow minded believers in narrow minded Churches because we make God very small. Our image of God needs to be purified and evangelised over and over again.

Richard Rohr sums up the challenge when he writes: "On Calvary Jesus did not change God's mind on humanity. On Calvary Jesus changed humanity's mind on God." The whole of Jesus' life and ministry and, for 2000 years, his active presence in so many men and women are reminders that God's ways are not our ways and his thoughts are not our thoughts.

An Irish man from Dublin visited the Aran Islands in 1919 and he wrote about the people there: "They had a medieval quality of wonder that came when a world was unexplored." (O'Malley, *On Another...*, p. 119)

I think that our problem may be that we have lost this sense of wonder when we think of God. He may have become a too familiar territory that we have tamed. The challenge for us is to remember that, for sure in faith we may know God, but at the same time the truth is that he will remain for ever a vast unexplored territory yet to be discovered and embraced with wonder.

May we learn anew to wonder and marvel at God's ways and thoughts. May we allow ourselves to be surprised by him, by his faithfulness in our regard, by his unfailing presence by our side, by his generous and unconditional love.