

25th Sunday in Ordinary Time, 20 September 2020

Scriptures: Isaiah 55:6-9; Philippians 1:20c-24; Matthew 20:1-16

Homily: Fr. Ken

The ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle wrote that there is an art to being generous. If people have the resources to be generous, they can do so without showing off, or making those who receive their generosity, feel patronized. People who are truly generous are those who do not value money in itself, but only in as much as they can use it on behalf of other people.

There is also an art to receiving. We can receive gifts, or help, or a compliment, in a gracious way. Or, we can be ungrateful, sullen, and resentful. Even worse, we can resent the good things that come to others, and be consumed with envy. Aristotle defined envy as "a kind of distress at apparent success on the part of one's equals". It is, then, feeling put out, or even bitter, at the good that happens to other people, especially people close to us, or of the same group.

In the Gospel reading we have the contrast of the generosity of the landowner and the envious reaction of the laborers. We might see the landowner as representing God and the workers as the people of the Old Testament.

The Jewish people had labored under the law of Moses for many centuries. Now that Jesus was also bringing in the Gentiles to be saved, some of the Jews felt a certain resentment. Certainly, Paul's letters show us that there were disputes between Jewish Christians and those who were converted from paganism. Such tensions would be natural in the formation of a new society. Perhaps the parable is a warning against being blinded by tensions such as this.

But the parable has a wider application than the early Church. We may at times react against the injustice that we see in the world, and often we are right to do so. There is a proper sense of indignation when we see a real injustice done. However, as far as our relations with God go, we have no cause for envy. Like the landowner in the parable, God bestows gifts to people according to the divine will, and everyone has been given some gift. The basic gift is, of course, life. Without that, we would have nothing either to moan about or to rejoice in. As St. Paul asks the Corinthians in this regard, "What do you have that was not given to you?"

Envy of other people's money, housing, good looks, fame, or even spiritual gifts, does nothing except to corrode the character of the person doing the envying. Thinking about the gifts we have been given ourselves and being grateful for them, is more positive and more gracious. We can also rejoice in the gifts that God gives to others. As members of the Church, we are all part of the same body, and can therefore share in each other's gifts. So rather than begrudging God's generosity or moaning about what we don't have, we can bear in mind the words of the 19th century English theologian St. John Henry Newman who wrote: "God has created me to do some definite service. God has committed some work to me which has not been committed to another. I am a link in a chain, a bond of connection between persons. God has not created me for nothing. I shall do good; I shall do God's work".