

TWENTY-FIFTH WEEK IN ORDINARY TIME

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A reflection taken from a sermon by St. Augustine

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ALL ARE EQUAL IN GOD'S KINGDOM

A reflection developed from a sermon by St. Augustine

“Are you jealous because I am generous?” This question is asked of those who think they have been wronged because others have worked less but received the same reward as they have. Now don't think of this in terms of an ordinary grape harvest but of the spiritual harvest which takes place on the Last Day. That is the day when God's reign is fully established. *“The Kingdom of Heaven is comparable to a householder who went out to hire workers for his vineyard.”* He hired workers all through the work day, which is the time of our earthly life, but paid everyone together when the time for work came to an end. In the parable the owner gives orders that each is to be paid beginning with the late comers and ending with those who came first. Why did he do this? Let me answer by asking you a question: Won't God reward everyone at the same time?

In another Gospel passage we read that on the last day, our king will say: *“Come, you whom the Heavenly Father has blessed, and take possession of the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.”* Suppose we think of this historically. The earliest righteous ones like Abel and Noah came early to work. But they will receive the joy of the resurrection at the same time as all others. We Christians are called last because we came nearer the end of the world. The reward is one and the same, and the time when all receive it is one and the same, so what sense does it make for the early comers to complain that they have a right to receive “more”? What could that “more” amount to?

In the Great Reward we shall all be equal. The wage paid is eternal life, in which all will have an equal share. It is true that some might seem to shine more brightly because of a more meritorious life—at least as humans see things—all are equally given the gift of eternal life. What is endless and fullness for all who share it can't be more or less for anyone. There will be equality. It may be that there will be special splendors according to the different lives people have led—e.g., one for those who lived marriage chastely and another for virgins. Yet where eternal life is concerned there can be no question of more or less.

Doesn't this remind us of God's call to love all others just as we love ourselves? If we love in this way how could we want to have more than another or want another to have more than some third person? Love, when it is like God's love, erases all differences and removes all jealousy. Can we be jealous because we have received the same reward as all others? We can't if we love all others just as we love ourselves. That is part of the reward. We have only to rejoice in it.

THE GIFT THAT IS THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN

A reflection taken from a homily by Fr. Karl Rahner

“Jesus said to his disciples: The Kingdom of Heaven is like a landowner going out at day break to hire workers for a vineyard.” This gospel passage, even though it is known, seems to me to get stranger and more incomprehensible each time it is read. It can't be simply a declaration that our God doesn't render to each of us according to what we have done, because it is also written in the Scriptures that God does render to each according to what each has done. What, then, is the parable telling us?

The landowner expressly asks the grumblers whether or not it is right to be generous. This seems to indicate that the “wage” given to the workers is not something each has earned and can rightly expect from a just employer. What each receives is an expression of God's generosity, God's free generosity. This would mean that God's incalculable mercy, the grace that cannot be understood in terms of justice and a just wage, is what ultimately determines everything.

Where and when God's mercy enters our lives? What does it mean to say that God's self-disclosure is that of one who freely disposes of us and doesn't negotiate? Aren't these entirely different questions? We can't find any answers in his parable. We can only say that, in the final analysis, all that anyone can earn, and even earns in the way one earns a wage, all must depend on the free disposition of God. God gives to us our free will and ordains our beginning and our ending according to what Scripture calls the Divine “good pleasure”. Yes, but from these facts there follows something of utmost importance.

The reality that God freely disposes of, what we can't negotiate or calculate in regard to its value, is our very self. Our self, just as we are—with our own life, our temperament, what we call our destiny, with our concrete surroundings and the time we lived, and in which we lived, with our family and with everything that we happen to be and cannot change—all are God's gift to us. They have helped make us who we are, as we say, and who we are is God's gift to us. If we grumble and complain about what others receive we are simply refusing to accept our very self as we are as God's gift to us. What we receive is our self.

This is what we need to accept without grumbling or protest. Life's work is to accept ourselves as a mysterious and gradually revealed gift of God's generosity. For God gives himself with this gift, and so gives everything we can receive. If we look at our lives we see we have not always done this. Perhaps that makes everyone a latecomer. But in the very end to accept this gift is to accept God. If you want God you must want the gift of being one who can receive God as only you in your uniqueness. That means only you can accept God in the unique way that corresponds to who you have become as you worked to open yourself to Divine Love.

JUDGE NOT THAT YOU MAY NOT BE JUDGED

A reflection developed from a text by Sr. Dianne Bergant

How we understand a parable has a great deal to do with who we identify with as we listen to it. Do you identify with the workers who grumbled that they weren't being recognized for the extent of their contribution to God's work but were being treated like people who had done almost nothing? Perhaps, on the other hand, you identify with the latecomers. But what if you try to identify with God? The Gospel text in which the parable is found includes the following words from Isaiah: "*For my thoughts are not your thoughts nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. As high as the heavens are above the earth so high are my ways about yours and my thoughts above your thoughts.*" What would happen if we tried to step out of our perspective and into God's?

The fact that we can't understand God's perspective from our own indicates how different God's thinking is from ours. Isaiah has told us that we can't understand God or God's ways. Eastern saints and mystics developed this into what they called an "apophatic" understanding of God; i.e., we understand what God is not and how God does not act. Use this as your starting point, then.

The parable we heard Sunday stated, in effect, that God calls people at various times during their lives. We know that this is a fact. We can accept facts even if we don't understand them. The parable also states that those who answer God's call will get "what is just". That matches what we have been taught to believe about God, so we can accept that too as a fact. But then our idea about "what is just" gets turned upside down.

It is another kind of fact that Divine Generosity seems a mystery to us. How does God give people what is "just" if God doesn't give to them according to "what they deserve"? But the fact is that no one "deserves" the mercy of God. It is a free gift, as is everything we have and are. What good would it do us if we received exactly what we have earned, however that might be determined? Can we think we would have more, or is it just that we want to have more than some other person? Are we afraid of what others have done? At one point St. Paul lists what he has suffered for Christ's and the Gospel's sake. But, if we take him at his (later) word he didn't use this to exalt himself above others. That would be contrary to his reason for suffering so much—the longing that absolutely everyone would find Christ and in Christ God's mercy.

The reign of God is one of divine generosity. We are invited to share in this. But this generosity and mercy is not a limited supply commodity so that if one gets more another gets less. What others have and are takes nothing away from what we are and have as a gift from God. The parable first of all challenges our faith and trust in God's love for us, because it is from that love that generosity and mercy spring. If it surpasses our understanding what do we care?

WHERE DO YOU FIND CHRIST?

A reflection developed from a text by St. Vincent de Paul

The poor often seem rough and unrefined but one must not judge them by the standards of “polite society” but those of Jesus. He did not judge anyone by their external appearance or in terms of mental gifts or higher education, as it is called. If we look at poor people with the eyes of faith, which were Jesus’ eyes, we see them in the same way we see Jesus. He and the poor are likewise God’s children. Thus for those who aren’t poor they make Jesus present—as he himself made clear.

Jesus was poor, born of poor parents, and he chose poor people as his special disciples, whom we call “apostles”. He was also looked down upon and mistreated—so much so that we are told he lost the appearance of a human person. He was a stumbling block to his fellow Jews and his Gospel was foolishness to Gentiles. But listen to what he said when he explained the mission the Heavenly Father had given him: “God sent me to preach the good news to the poor.” Oughtn’t we to imitate Christ in caring for the poor, consoling them, helping them, supporting their cries for justice and satisfaction of their basic needs?

Christ made himself the servant of the poor and shared their poverty. He went so far as to say that he would consider every deed which either helps or harms the poor as done for or against himself. God surely loves the poor and loves those who love the poor. When one holds anyone dear that person includes in love those who love or serve the one held dear. When we go out of our way to be with the poor and needy, try to understand their concerns and help them, we are moving toward what St. Paul described when he said: “I have become all things to all people”.

We must be stirred by our neighbor’s worries and distress. It is our duty to prefer the service of the poor to everything else and to offer help as quickly as we can. If a needy one requires medicine or other help when you are praying do whatever has to be done for them. Offer the deed to God as a prayer. God is not neglected when you “leave him” for such a service. You merely interrupt one God-centered work to do another. What is done is done for God. Charity is greater in importance than any rule and all rules must lead to charity. Do whatever charity commands. The poor have been given us as our “employers”, especially those who are outcasts, and we must always attend to them as much as to any earthly boss or socially important person.

The Lord Jesus has identified with the poor in pointing out that we do to him what we do, or refuse to do, to the poor and outcast. We must imitate our Lord in treating such people just as we would want to be treated if we were in their place. They are Christ for us. If we don’t find Christ in such people we won’t find him anywhere.

THE CHARITY AT THE HEART OF COMMON LIFE

A reflection from a treatise “On the Common Life” by Baldwin of Ford

Dearly beloved, let us anxiously attend to all that concerns our observance of the common life. That means, first, keeping the unity of the spirit and the bond of peace foremost in our minds. We can only do this by the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the coming of the Holy Spirit. It is from the love of God that the unity of the Spirit comes, just as it is from the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ that the bond of peace comes. Without the gift of the Holy Spirit there would be no communion of the sort necessary if life in common is to be faith-filled and faith-directed and faith-nourishing.

The unity necessary for living together in this way is founded on and preserved by the love which God shows and gives us. The Lord Jesus is our peace and makes even those who are otherwise hostile one. At his birth angels sang about the peace that comes through him to all who live in good will. When Jesus was about to ascend into Heaven he said: My peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you.

What is this peace? It is something given us so that the unity the Spirit brings can be preserved. That means it is a charity shown toward one another, a mutual charity by means of which we love one another. If we live in this love the unity remains unbroken. If we are of one heart then there are no serious divisions among us. St. Peter exhorted all who believe on this point. *“Above all things preserve constant charity among yourselves.”* What is this charity? It makes what is mine also thine, and enables us to love one another by sharing all.

We see from what I have said already what the common life is and what its law is. We see what talk about the unity of the Spirit means practically. We see what the bond of peace requires from us. We must share all and turn away from every opportunity to possess things exclusively as our own. This should be our abiding intention in all we do. We must strive not only to have but one heart and one soul and then strive to make sure all things are had in common. This is how we live out the grace given us by our Lord Jesus Christ; it is how the love of God expresses itself concretely; it is how the coming of the Holy Spirit shapes and forms us to be visible likenesses of our Lord. There are no better nor higher goals to strive after than these. So let us dedicate ourselves to helping each other strive to make these gifts the heart and center of our common life. Then it will truly foreshadow the bliss of the Kingdom of God that is coming to us, and soon.

HOW THE ANGELS MODEL A GODLY LIFE

A reflection taken from a sermon by St. Bernard

What are the ways of the Holy Angels? Recall first the words of our Lord: “You will see the angels ascending and descending upon the Son of man.” Their lives consist of ascents and descents. They ascend because of their service to Christ and they descend for our sake. They ascend by contemplating and they descend because of compassion. It is for this reason that we are told that they guard us in all our goings and comings, all our ways. They ascend to God’s face and descend at God’s nod, for God has given his angels charge over us. Yet in this descent they are not deprived of the vision of God’s glory; they always behold the face of the Heavenly Father, as Jesus himself points out.

Now contemplation and compassion are very important in our walking the ways that Jesus has taught us. That the angels also walk the ways the Lord does should be obvious. For when they ascend to contemplation they see truth, and in desiring this they find a satisfaction that always leads to even deeper desire. These spirits are our ministers and not our masters. They imitate the example given by the Only Begotten Son, who came not to be served but to serve.

The fruit of these angelic ways is happiness for themselves and obedience in loving. We obtain this by divine grace and are helped and guarded in doing this by the angels. They guard us in all our needs, in all our desires. Without this help we would easily run in ways leading to death. That means we would either become stubborn or greedy and presumptuous. These are the ways of demons and not of angels or human beings.

God has charged the angels not with turning you from your ways in so far as they are Godly and in Christ. God charges them to keep you in such ways so that you may end up in God’s ways. Just as angels act purely out of charity so they lead us to do so too. Our stubbornness is turned into steadfastness in seeking God, and every temptation to greediness is made into a deeper longing for our Heavenly Home and a way of life that leads there.

Likewise, angelic care helps us to keep our heart unburdened by desires which can never lead to satisfaction and rest. Those who feel many “necessities” find life burdensome, and the more so because such needs are never brought to an end. By freeing us from such burdens in leading us to ascend to God in contemplation the angles free us and make us light.

O children why do you love vanity. An unburdened heart should seek after and love truth. And truth gives birth to mercy. In helping us seek truth and do mercy the angels lead us into God’s ways and salvation.

THE GIFT OF JOY IN THE LORD

A reflection taken from a letter of St. Jerome to Eustochius

When the inner person has begun to waver a little between vice and virtue one needs to say: Why are you sad, O my Soul, and why do you upset me? Hope in God, for I will praise God, my salvation.” It would be better, of course, never to allow such thoughts to arise. We want nothing that is of Babylon, nothing that breeds only confusion, to grow up within us. The time to destroy an enemy is while that enemy is still weak.

How often did I think of myself, let alone the sort of delights that go with urban living? I then had settled in a desert place and a vast solitude and the scorching heat of the sun was a proper dwelling place for a monk. Yet at times I was filled with bitter feelings. I was roughly clothed in sackcloth and I was a thoroughly unlovely sight. My skin was neglected and had begun to look like that of an Ethiopian. I wept daily. I groaned daily. And if ever insistent tiredness overcame my resistance and I fell asleep then I bruised myself falling forward onto the bare earth.

In food and drink I found no delight. Even the sick drink only cold water. It is a luxury to eat any cooked food. So there it was. I had condemned myself to all this out of fear of hell. I was in a prison of my own making. My only companions were scorpions and wild animals. Yet in my mind I seemed to be surrounded by dancing girls. Even if my face looked pale from fasting my mind was as hot with desire as a body can be when one feels as cold as ice in the night. My flesh seemed as good as dead and yet the fires of passion kept boiling within me.

Feeling bereft of all help, I imagined myself lying at Jesus feet. I bathed them with my tears and wiped them with my hair. When my flesh rebelled I subdued it by weeks of fasting. I am not ashamed of this hapless state. Indeed, now I regret and lament that I am not what I was then. I recall that I often treated day and night alike, filling them with lamentation and never ceasing to beat my breast until peace of mind returned. I was even afraid of my little cell—as though it were aware of my thoughts.

I used to go out alone into the desert. If I saw a deep valley or a rugged mountain or some crag I made it my place of prayer. It was really a place for punishing myself for what I thought of as my “wretched flesh”. And yet I sometimes seemed to be surrounded by companies of angels, rejoicing and singing with happiness. I recalled the verse, “*we run after you following the odor of your ointments*”.

Running after the Lord! That is what was and is important above all else. It makes the monastic life a great and good thing. May we ever help one another run after Jesus and the Heavenly Father! From this running is born our foretaste of the gift of joy in the Lord.