

1st February 2015
SEPTUAGESIMA SUNDAY

When evening was come, the lord of the vineyard saith to his steward: Call the labourers and pay them their hire, beginning from the last even to the first.

– Saint Matthew 20:8.



In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Although geologists tell us that England – and even snowy Denmark – had vineyards in the Middle Ages, it has been a long time since these lands have known largescale wine production, so we shall have to use our imaginations to understand today’s parable – one of three that use the image of a vineyard, so well known to the people of Palestine at the time of Our Saviour.

To understand today’s parable we must especially ask ourselves three things: what is the vineyard? who are the labourers hired at different times throughout the day? what is the meaning of the payment given to all the workers at the fall of evening? The theme of this parable, like that of most of Christ’s parables, is the Kingdom of God. This is an expression which designates the Church, which is the presence of God’s kingdom in our world. This kingdom will reach its perfect state only in heaven, but it is already through the Church that God carries on his work in the world.

The vineyard, as you probably guessed, is the Church, since in the words of the Prophet Isaiah, “the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel” (5:7), “Israel” being the Old Testament name for the Church, the Chosen People. The householder has done everything he can for this beloved vineyard. To quote again from Isaiah: “he fenced it in, and picked the stones out of it, and planted it with the choicest vines, and built a tower in the midst thereof, and set up a winepress therein” (5:2). This winepress is the most important thing in the vineyard of course; if the vineyard produced no wine it would be useless. All through the long centuries of sacred history, God prepared his vineyard so that one day the winepress would pour forth the Precious Blood of our redemption. As the prophecy says, “He shall wash his robe in wine, and his garment in the blood of the grape” (Genesis 49:11), an allusion to the Passion of Christ.

The master of the vineyard – that is, God – called workers in the early morning, and at the third hour of day, and at the sixth and ninth hours, and finally in the last hour of daylight. This is the old Roman method of counting time, based on the hours of sunlight: the “third hour” of sunlight is around 9

a.m., and so on. The different periods of time symbolize the stages of sacred history, when God slowly unfolded his divine plan for our salvation. According to Saint Gregory the Great: “The early morning of the world was from Adam until Noah; the third hour from Noah until Abraham; the sixth hour from Abraham until Moses; the ninth hour from Moses until the coming of the Lord; the eleventh hour from the coming of the Lord until the end of the world” (*Homily 19 on the Gospels*). The workers who have borne the “burden of the day” (St. Matthew 20:12) are the Jews, who had to endure the heavy burden of the Old Law, with its many obligations. Just as the early workers in today’s Gospel murmured when the latecomers received the same payment, the Book of Acts tells us that many of the converted Jews in the early Church complained that the Gentile Christians were baptized without having to keep the Law of Moses. This is a warning for all of us: we should be grateful for the graces shown to others, not bitter and envious.

In the vineyard of the Lord, everyone is called upon to work. The first man to be hired, our father Adam, was given a work to do: “the Lord God took man, and put him into paradise ... to cultivate it and to keep it” (Genesis 2:15). When we ourselves were baptized we entered the vineyard, and the priest told us the terms of our employment: “If then you desire to enter into life, keep the commandments.” That is why Saint Paul tells us: “work out your salvation with fear and trembling” (Philippians 2:12). In other words, even though God gives all the graces we need in order to be saved, salvation is not automatic: we need to cooperate. When he calls us into his vineyard we need to accept the invitation, and while we are there we need to work.

But at the eleventh hour, not long before sunset, the householder finds other men standing idle in the marketplace. If the vineyard is the Church, then the marketplace is the world, occupied by those who have not yet heard the word of God. “Why stand you here all the day idle? They say to him: Because no man hath hired us. He saith to them: Go you also into my vineyard” (St. Matthew 20:6-7). These workers of the eleventh hour are the Gentiles, unlike the Jews who had already been working in the vineyard for many hours. The Gentiles are the last to be called, and so the “eleventh hour” is the time in which we are now living, in keeping with the teaching of Saint John: “Little children, it is [now] the last hour” (I John 2:18). The call of the Gentiles is the sign of the fullness of time.

When the householder asks these latecomers, the Gentiles, why they have stood idling in the marketplace, they respond, “Because no man hath hired us” (St. Matthew 20:7). Saint Paul gives us the explanation: “How then shall they call on [the Lord], in whom they have not believed? Or how shall they believe him, of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear, without a preacher?” (Romans 10:14). But look what good hearts these men have: once

they hear the truth, they are ready to embrace it. Even the eleventh hour is not too late to begin working in the vineyard of the Lord. “If you shall hear his voice, harden not your hearts” (Psalm 94:8). The tragedy of knowing that many people today are still far from the vineyard should also prompt us to pray for missionary vocations zealous for the salvation of souls. “The harvest indeed is great, but the labourers are few. Pray ye therefore the Lord of the harvest, that he send labourers into his harvest” (St. Luke 10:2).

At the fall of evening, the householder asks his steward to pay all the workers, just as at the end of time, the Father will deliver the judgment of the world into the hands of Christ, when “he will render to every man according to his works” (Romans 2:6). The steward pays them at the end of the day because, as Our Lord said, “I must work the works of him that sent me, whilst it is day: the night cometh, when no man can work” (John 9:4). Likewise at the end of our life, whether we have worked in the vineyard since dawn or only been converted like our ancestors the Gentiles in the eleventh hour, we shall be judged according to our response to God’s invitation, for once our soul leaves our body the time of merit will be over. “It is appointed unto men once to die, and after this the judgment” (Hebrews 9:27).

The first workers were promised a whole penny: the Gospel calls it a *denarius*, a Roman coin worth ten brass farthings. In other words, it is the reward for following God’s Law, summarized in the Ten Commandments. In the kingdom of heaven God rewards all those who laboured in his vineyard: the faithful of the Old Covenant and the Gentiles converted in the last days, the saints who were faithful since their earliest youth and those like the Good Thief who are touched by grace only at the end. But our salvation is worth more than the penny of the parable, since we “were not redeemed with corruptible things as gold or silver ... but with the precious blood of Christ” (I Peter 1:18-19). Today, at the beginning of our preparations for Lent and Easter, the Gospel reminds us of the gratitude we ought to have for God, whose overflowing love will not allow him to be content with giving only what is just. He wants to give us nothing less than his own self, if only we will let him. “Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither hath it entered into the heart of man, what things God hath prepared for them that love him” (I Corinthians 2:9).



In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.