

Homily for January 1, 2002
32th Sunday in Ordinary Time

By Father Charles Bowes

2 Maccabees 7:1-2, 9-14
2 Thessalonians 2:16, 3:5
Luke 20: 27-38

A new existence... freed from the limitations of this life.

25th Sunday in Ordinary Time Cycle C

September 22, 2002

Isaiah 55:6-9

Philippians 1:20c-24, 27a

Matthew 20:1-16a

Same God God's ways are not ours.

I love this gospel story because everybody gets upset by it - nobody is

happy with this obvious injustice according to the way we view justice. But

folks, that's exactly what the story is supposed to do - it's supposed to

get us upset. That means it's working. It was just as upsetting for the

folks who heard it for the first time way back in Jesus' day. Simply put:

God's ways are not our ways - God will always be more merciful, more

generous than any human reckoning. The story isn't about labor relations

it's about God's love - different from ours and challenging.

Can you imagine the outrage of anyone today acted like the employer in

Jesus' parable? It'd be scandalous for any employer to pay everyone the same amount, no matter how long they worked.

The labor unions would call

for industrial action. There would be a huge outcry from the media. There

would be accusations of injustice, and perhaps legal action would result.

Would any owner or foreman be stupid enough to pay the same wages to those

who worked one hour as to those who worked the entire day? This was poor

labor relations in the first century as well as today. This story must have

sounded weird to Jesus' hearers because no one hiring workers would act that

way.

This story is traditionally called "The Parable of the Workers in the

Vineyard" but some suggest that it should be called "The Parable of the

Generous Employer" or perhaps "The Eccentric Employer."

Many of Jesus' parables show how differently God acts toward us compared to

how we think God ought to act. God's ways are

not our ways, Isaiah reminds

us in chapter fifty-five of our first reading. "My thoughts are not your

thoughts, nor are your ways my ways says the Lord. For as the heavens are

higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts

than your thoughts."

We would like a God who is manageable and does what we want. We'd like a

comfortable God who doesn't challenge us but is ready to bail us out when

we're in a mess. We naturally want to bargain with God with prayers like,

"Lord, if you get me out of this mess, I'll do something big for you." We'd

like a God who will help us when we need it but who doesn't interfere with

our lives too much. There's an old saying that goes like this: "In the

beginning God created us in his own image and we've been returning the

compliment ever since." The God who comes to us in scripture and through

Jesus Christ stands in sharp contrast to the comfortable daddy that we

create. God is a God of surprises. My prayer to the Father through Jesus

in this parable goes something like this: "Lord, what was it like for you

to discover that God was different that you imagined God to be?" Or, "Lord,

what was it like for you to discover that you were God's son instead of the

Creator?"

What's really eating the fellows who

worked all day in the parable of the

vineyard? It isn't the denarius they were paid for their labor, after all,

that was the wage that they agreed upon at the start of the day. And it

isn't simply the "injustice" they think they experienced when those who

worked for one hour are paid at the same rate as they are. What really gets

these guys is their own rising expectations of what they will be paid. They

last to come are paid first, remember, a typical gospel ploy, and since the

latecomers get a denarius for their short shift, the fulltime workers begin

to anticipate a raise. Though they originally agreed upon the denarius,

they now want and expect more than that - much more! The wage that once

satisfied them perfectly has come to seem like a gross insult. It is their

shift in perception, and not the money itself, that chafes at them.

Concupiscence, the desire for more, is the original sin. It is at the

bottom of most other sins: greed, envy, lust, gluttony, you name it. Our

rising expectations of our own word or of what the world owes us, are a

continual temptation that trips us up if we are not careful to defuse it.

How often are we angered or injured over praise that does not come, not

because it was promised, but because we anticipated it. How often do we

grow restless, not because we've lost anything that