



## Twenty-Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time September 21, 2014 A

- A parable about God's generosity
- Paul's amazing attitude towards death

Today's readings give us much to think about. In the *first reading* from Isaiah, God reminds us that "his ways are not our ways" (Is.55). As we look at our lives and the lives of others, we may sometimes wonder and question God's ways. I assume we may, at times, have a very hard time understanding and embracing God's ways.

In Jesus' time, the Pharisees had a very hard time understanding his hospitality and outreach to sinners. In Luke's Gospel, Jesus tells the parable of the prodigal son to explain God's attitude towards sinners. In today's Gospel (Mt. 20:1-16), Jesus tells another parable to explain God's attitude towards those who turn to him late in life and those who often get left behind in today's society. Commenting on today's parable, Fr. Flor McCarthy offers these two reflections.

### **Reflection one**

*Many people consider Christ's story an unfair story, because it seems to favour the idler at the expense of the hard worker. In order to understand and appreciate the story we need to know what is going on in it.*

*Imagine the following scene (which I witnessed myself). A cross-roads on the edge of a shanty town near Cape Town, South Africa. It's mid-morning. Men are gathered at the side of the road. Some are lying down under the trees to escape the blazing sun. But most are standing in the open.*

*What are they doing there? They are waiting—waiting for some farmer or builder to come along and hire them for the day. Some have been there since sunrise. Indeed I'm told that some of them have been there overnight. And still you will find people who say that this kind of people don't want to work.*

*They are totally exposed. They are on display. Many eyes scan them—indifferent eyes, curious eyes, hostile eyes. Their value depends on what people want from them. They have no value in themselves. They will settle for the minimum wage. It is already eleven o'clock in the morning. A look of dejection is beginning to settle on their furrowed faces. Their day is wearing on. Hope is fading.*

*For most of these men there will be no eleventh-hour reprieve. They will go home to their shacks and their families empty-handed. In this world the first shall be first, and the last shall be last.*

*The eleventh-hour people in Jesus' story were not idlers. They wanted to work. It was just that nobody had hired them. Imagine how they felt as the day drew to a close. They felt rejected, useless, hopeless.*

*The idea that any employer would take these people on at the eleventh hour, and pay them a full day's wage, was unthinkable. Yet this is exactly what the owner of the vineyard did. This is the strong point of the parable.*

*Jesus' audience knew exactly what he was getting at. The vineyard was the Kingdom of God. Those who had been working all day long were the Pharisees and the Jews in general. The eleventh-hour people were sinners and the Gentiles.*

*Jesus was saying that God was offering the Kingdom to sinners and Gentiles on equal terms with the Jews. The Jews objected vigorously. They didn't think it was fair; they thought they deserved preferential treatment. They assumed that God worked on the merit system. According to this system, you must earn your graces by hard work. And here was Jesus saying that God does not work on the merit system at all.*

*You would expect that people who have worked hard and risen from poverty to relative wealth would be compassionate towards those who haven't made that journey. Yet the contrary seems to be generally the case. They tend to be rather harsh in their judgment of the poor, and to resent help given to the poor. Their attitude is: I had to work hard in order to make it. Nobody gave me anything for nothing. If I did it, why can't they?*

*If one is into worthiness, competition, and rewards, this Gospel won't make much sense. Jesus' parable makes little sense from the point of view of strict justice. But which of us would want to be treated by God according to strict justice? Do we not all stand more in need of his mercy and generosity than of his justice? This parable is not about justice; it is about mercy and generosity.*

*When we come into God's presence let us not parade our entitlements, our rights, our deserts. We can't put God in our debt. Everything comes to us as a gift from God, a gift motivated by his love for us. Let us rejoice that God is generous to a degree that far outstrips*

human generosity. Let us open our hearts to God's generosity. And having experienced it, let it serve as a model for our dealings with others.

A conversion is required before we can begin to act like God. Not an intellectual conversion, but a conversion of the heart.

### Conversion questions

- Today's first reading says that "God's ways are not our ways." An important part of our ongoing conversion process is our readiness to embrace the ways of God that we do not like. Where are you with that right now?
- How big is your God? Can you genuinely rejoice when a big sinner, even someone who has given you a hard time for years, suddenly converts to Jesus and "steals heaven"?

### Reflection two

If one considers Jesus' story unfair, here is another story which may help us to understand the point Jesus was making.

The final of the 3000 metres was in progress. The runners stayed bunched together until halfway round the last lap. Then the eventual winner eased himself into the lead. As he did so another man fell back into last place after a desperate effort to keep up. The other runners were strung out in between.

As the leader, a local man, came into the home straight, the spectators rose to him. When the news was flashed up that he had set a new world record, thunderous applause echoed around the stadium. The cameras followed him as he did a lap of honour. He got a standing ovation as he went around. Bouquets of flowers were thrown in his direction.

Afterwards everybody wanted to clap him on the back and shake his hand. Microphones were thrust in front of him. 'How does it feel to be a champion?' he was asked. Beaming all over he replied. 'Wonderful! Absolutely wonderful!' Already newspapers were queuing up for the exclusive rights to his story, and company executives, cheque books in hand, were doing likewise for the right to use his name to endorse their products.

While all this was going on, the other runners had finished the race. The last man had to really struggle to finish. Then, with head bowed, he departed for the dressing rooms.

A VIP had been invited to perform the prize-giving ceremony. The first three runners home were waiting, all smiles, to take their places on the victory podium. The first sign that something unusual was about to happen was when the VIP said he wanted all the runners present at the ceremony. The runners were duly called, and all was now set.

Then what did he do? He called the man who came in last and gave the gold medal to him. He gave the silver medal to the man who had come second last, and the bronze medal to the man who came third last. There were gasps of astonishment from the crowd, and sighs of embarrassment from the organizers. The mistake was pointed out to him. But he said, 'This is the way I want it.' Then he proceeded to give a warm handshake to each of the other runners right down to the man who came first. When the latter came forward he was very angry.

'This is not fair!' he exclaimed.

'So you think it's not fair?' the VIP replied calmly.

'I do,' said the man. 'I won the race. So I deserve to get the gold medal.'

'Friend,' said the VIP, 'haven't you got enough already?'

'What do you mean?' the man asked.

'You've had the satisfaction of winning the race. You've had the applause of the crowd and the attention of the media. On top of all this, you've had lucrative contracts offered to you. Now consider the man who came last. He finished the race too. And what did he get for his efforts? Nothing. Would it be fairer if you got everything while he got nothing?'

With that the victor was reduced to silence. Still fuming, he turned and went away.

The aim of this story is not to down-play the achievement of the winner but to make a point. It seems wrong that one person should get everything, while another gets nothing. I know this is exactly what happens in our world—the winner takes all.

Some might still say that the story is an outrageous one. But is it any more outrageous than Jesus' story about the workers in the vineyard?

What point was Jesus making? The key to understanding the story is contained in the phrase, 'Are you envious because I am generous?' The story is not about justice. It is about generosity, but not ordinary generosity. It's about a generosity unlike anything we've ever known. It is about the generosity of God.

The generosity of God is a great comfort to us. But it is also a great challenge, because we are called to imitate it; to make our ways of dealing with one another more like God's way of dealing with us. A conversion is required before we can begin to act like God. Not an intellectual conversion, but a conversion of the heart.

Which of us would like to be treated by God according to strict justice? Do we not all long for mercy rather than justice? We can't put God in our debt. But we don't need to. God is generous to a degree that far outstrips human generosity. All we have to do is open our hearts to God's generosity. And having experienced it, let it serve as a model for our dealings with others.

[*New Sunday and Holy Day Liturgies* by Flor McCarthy.  
Permission granted by Dominican Publications,  
[www.dominicanpublications.com](http://www.dominicanpublications.com).]

### Conversion questions

How did you feel when the man who came in last received the gold medal? Is it a decision you would have supported? If not, why not?

### Paul's amazing attitude towards life and death

In the *second reading* (Phil 1:20-24) we find Paul writing to the Philippians from prison. He says for him life is about his relationship with Christ. If he dies, that would be fine for it would bring him into a closer relationship with Jesus. If he lives, that would also be great for it would give him more time to spread the Good News about Jesus.

I find Paul's attitude amazing, inspiring and challenging. I wish I could be as detached as Paul from life here on earth. I'm sure all of us want to go to heaven, but none of us is anxious to get on the next train. Research shows that enormous amounts of money are spent on dying people during the last four months of their lives.

### Conversion questions

- How would you end the statement: "For me, life . . ."
- How easy or hard is it for you to think about your own dying?

Have a blessed week,

