

The Eleventh Hour Laborer
25th Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)
(Mt 20:1-16)

According to the Fathers of the Church,¹ there are two basic ways to interpret the parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard. In the first way, it describes the ages of salvation history, beginning with Adam and Eve, who were placed in the garden at the dawn of history to cultivate it with God's blessing (Gn 1:28-30).

Due to sin, man abandoned his holy work in favor of an evil life, and God thus visited him again in the time of Noah and Abraham, and again in the time of Moses and the Exodus, sending him back to the vineyard. God renewed the world for Noah, promised Abraham he would inherit the land, and brought the Israelites into the Promised Land flowing with milk and honey. Each time God made covenants, agreements with man to reward him for his labor and faithfulness. Each time, man would fall back into laziness and sin, abandoning his holy work.

“Time and again God offered man covenants and through the prophets taught him to look forward to salvation” (Eucharistic Prayer IV).

Finally, in the fullness of time as the “day” comes to its completion, God makes one last great effort to bring mankind into his Vineyard, the Church. This is the “eleventh hour,” and these are the Gentiles, people who have been living idle lives in the marketplace during all this time of the Old Testament when God has been supervising and disciplining His chosen people under the Law of Moses. The apostles go out to all the world pressing mankind into God's service before it is too late and the sun sets on the world.

In the second interpretation, the hours of the day refer to the stages of one's life, from childhood to old age. Throughout our life, because of Sloth we fall away from the original fervor of our Baptism and require renewal. Throughout our life, God calls us to deeper and deeper conversion. Moreover, as we grow older we need to continually re-learn the faith, always deepening our knowledge and assimilation. This can be seen in any parish, where the pastoral efforts of the Church focus upon Baptism at infancy, First Holy Communion at childhood, Confirmation in youth, Marriage in adulthood, and Anointing of the Sick in old age. Each of these sacramental milestones renews and deepens the promise of salvation, preparing us for the judgment and reward that is to follow our life, according to the labor of our faith.²

¹ For example, Pope St Gregory the Great's *Homily on Matt 20:1-16*

² “This is the work of God, to believe in the One He has sent” (Jn 6:29).

There are several lessons we can apply from this parable. First, it says a great deal about ourselves, and serves as a warning against the danger of spiritual laziness. Unless someone (God, the Church, some prophet) “stays on our case” about the importance of our moral and spiritual life, we tend to fall away, and abandon our fidelity to the covenant of baptism. There are many Christians for whom the “eleventh hour” is the last attempt on God’s part, after many previous attempts, to bring about conversion before it is too late. We have important work to do in the Vineyard of the Lord, yet again and again the “marketplace” of the world with its allure of false riches draws us away.

Second, the parable says a great deal about God, who never gives up on His people despite their unfaithfulness. God pursues man to the very last hour. As long as there is “day,” it is not too late, there is still hope. Salvation cannot take place without man’s cooperation – man must be working in the Vineyard and not squandering his life the Marketplace to be saved – but the opportunity for salvation will not be lost due to any failure of God’s mercy. Even though we might be idle all day, and it is a “deathbed conversion,” God’s invitation presses us to the end.

Third, the parable presents the wages as a mystery equal for everyone. The “denarius” received by each of the workman for his labor represents salvation, the reward of heaven given by God to His servants. By giving each laborer the same thing, regardless of the hours worked, the parable emphasizes that salvation is not something which is “earned,” corresponding to human effort. It is rather a free gift of grace corresponding to God’s generosity.

Furthermore, we understand salvation to be the gift of God Himself. Heaven is the beatific vision of God, and God is the same for all. God’s love is equal for everyone.

The fourth important lesson, is therefore not to judge one’s neighbor. Envy is the sin by which we compare ourselves to others according to a false or selfish conception of justice. From our human perspective, and human justice, each person should be rewarded for the exact hours worked – this is indeed the principle we follow in the world with regard to earthly wages. But God’s grace cannot be measured by this standard, His mercy always supersedes earthly justice. Even should we work our entire lives in God’s vineyard with utmost dedication and fidelity, that still would not correspond to the eternal value of God’s denarius. Therefore, we may not judge our fellow workmen or be resentful when some Catholics struggle to attend Mass fully, or participate only partially in their faith. With patience and love we continue to invite and exhort, calling to repentance, but in the end the question of salvation remains between God and that soul.

In the early Church, the Jewish Christians may have been resentful of the Gentile converts, these “eleventh hour” laborers who were so easily admitted to the Vineyard of the Lord completely bypassing the “heat of the day” – the hard work and discipline of the Law of Moses – but there is no justification for this envy. It is a *privilege* to have been able to work for the Lord since birth, not a burden. It is an *honor* to be able to make sacrifices for the Lord all one’s life, and not just on one’s deathbed. In the end, what is most important is being able to receive the denarius with *gratitude* and *humility*, something that might in fact occur more readily with the eleventh hour conversion, than with the grudging lifetime of duty.