

25th Sunday In Ordinary Time Cycle A (September 24th, 2017)

Today's reading comes from a portion of Isaiah most biblical scholars date toward the end of Judah's exile in Babylon, when the rise of Cyrus of Persia, in defiance and challenge of Babylon, gave many Israelites hope for better lives under a somewhat gentler Persian hand.¹⁴ The people are reminded that in returning to the land, they must also return to God. Three verses before this Isaiah invites Israel to renew the covenant. If they do not, they will be displaced. They are being warned: don't presume on God's covenant love. That was a foreign thought.² The Catechism tells us that from the time that the human race was shattered by sin, God aimed at saving mankind part-by-part.¹ (CCC 56) We see from the historical events following the coming of Christ that Israel was not replaced in an absolute sense, for the vocation of Israel is "irrevocable." Israel was not so much replaced as expanded. She now includes us. We are now Israelites in spirit and these words to them are now addressed to us.²

Isaiah 55:6-9

6 **Seek the Lord** This phrase, which is also used in other places in the Bible, means a humble turning to God with urgent prayer and desperate need.⁴ **while he may be found, call him while he is near.** If you feel that God is far from you, guess who moved? This passage urges us to seize the day! Take advantage of the moment! Make the most of the present opportunity! Strike while the iron is hot! Who knows how much time we have left on earth or how long genuine conversion will take? **WE NEED TO GET STARTED!**⁶ Think of what could happen to change this "while He may be found." Jeremiah 29:12 reminds us of how we can seek the Lord: "When you call to me, when you go to pray to me, I will listen to you. When you look for me, you will find me. Yes, when you seek me with all your heart, you will find me with you, says the Lord."

7 **Let the scoundrel forsake his way, and the wicked his thoughts; let him turn to the Lord for mercy;**

Mark Shea points out that mercy is God's greatest attribute because it cost God nothing, so far as we know, to create the universe, but to redeem rebellious creatures cost him crucifixion.⁵ **to our God, who is generous in forgiving.** If we wish to find mercy from the Lord, the Beatitudes tell us how to go about it: "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy." The Catechism tells us that the works of mercy are charitable actions by which we come to the aid of our neighbor in his spiritual and bodily necessities. Instructing, advising, consoling, and comforting are spiritual works of mercy, as are forgiving and bearing wrongs patiently. The corporal works of mercy consist especially in feeding the hungry, sheltering the homeless, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and imprisoned and burying the dead.¹ (CCC 2447) St. Augustine wrote: "Do not say: 'Tomorrow, I will be converted; tomorrow, I will give thanks to God; and all my sins, today's and yesterday's, will be forgiven'. It is true that God promises forgiveness for your conversion; but He does not promise tomorrow for your delays."¹⁵

8 **For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord.** While our habits of thinking often do not coincide with God's, here Israel is being warned not to presume on God's covenant love. His "ways," which are above our ways, are aimed at universal salvation, not merely national or racial honor.²

9As high as the heavens are above the earth, so high are my ways above your ways and my thoughts above your thoughts. We need to know, study and live out his daily Word so that our ways will be His ways. He will reveal His holy will to us, but we have to hunger and thirst to seek for Him, for He is a gentle and loving God who seeks us more than we seek Him. He stands always ready at the door to our heart, waiting for us to let Him come in. We should be aware that the *desire* to seek the will of God is itself a gift of grace from God.³

Philippians 1:20c-24, 27a

Philippi is a city north of the Aegean Sea where St. Paul founded the first Christian church in Europe around the year 51. He lived there for some years and had special affection for these people, which they reciprocated. Acts 16:11-40 tells us that he suffered imprisonment and the lash on their account. The Philippians, for their part, sent Epaphroditus to Rome to look after Paul when he was imprisoned there. Epaphroditus, who was a great help at first, soon became seriously ill. Once he was on the way to recovery, St. Paul sent him back home with a letter addressed to the Philippians in which he simply expresses his gratitude to the Father for all consolation and to the Philippians for the kindness and attention they showed him and for never being a source of worry to him but rather of consolation.¹⁶ It is clear that Paul feels a special affection and tenderness for these people. Every line of this letter reveals the joyful pride he feels in the authentic Christian witness of this community. Paul is writing this meditation from prison, knowing that he can be martyred at any moment.⁶

Brothers and sisters:

20Christ will be magnified in my body, whether by life or by death. Paul knew that he could be released, which would allow him to keep up his apostolic work, or he could be executed. In either case he is able to bear witness to Christ. Everything we have is a gift from God and the life of a Christian, complete with any suffering he experiences, and even death, identifies him in some way with Christ's own life. This identification is the goal of every Christian.⁸

21For to me life is Christ, Through baptism Paul has died to his former life and now lives an existence entirely taken over by Christ, one that transcends the barrier of physical death.¹⁶ **and death is gain.** For the person who dies in the grace of God, death means entering into the joy of the Lord, seeing Him face to face and enjoying that which is described in Corinthians: "what no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him." St. Cyprian pointed out that "when his disciples became sad because Christ told them that he was going away, he said to them, 'If you loved me, you would have rejoiced, because I go to the Father' thereby teaching them that, when those we love leave this world, we should rejoice rather than be sad."⁸ This joy is the reason that the church can use the color white for funerals.¹⁷

22If I go on living in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. BY THE VERY FACT THAT YOU ARE ALIVE we know that God still has some work for you to do! Does somebody need your prayers? Your help? Your kindness? God still has something that He wants you to do or you would not be here today! **And I do not know which I shall choose.** Paul is puzzling over which outcome he would prefer. Whether the legal proceedings bring him release or execution, he believes that Christ will be honored through him. Paul's dilemma is that both alternatives will turn out for the good: either he will come to know Christ in the fullest way possible as a martyr, or he will continue to make Christ known as a missionary.¹⁸ The Catechism reminds us that when the single course of our

earthly life is completed, we shall not return to other earthly lives: it is appointed for men to die ONCE. There is NO reincarnation after death.¹ (CCC 1013)

23I am caught between the two. I long to depart this life The Church teaches that in this “departure” which is death, the soul is separated from the body but that it will be reunited with the body on the day of resurrection of the dead.¹ (CCC 1005) **and be with Christ**, To “be with the lord” was St. Paul’s expectation for the parousia—the end times. Now, due to the proximity of death, he realizes that another possibility exists. Paul now reckons with an intermediate state in which the deceased Christian is “with Christ” after death and before the resurrection.¹⁶ Paul sees death as a liberation from earthly ties which allows him immediately to “be with Christ.” These words indicate that those who die in grace do not have to wait until the Last Judgment to enjoy God in heaven. This was the teaching of the church at the Second Council of Lyons: “the souls of those who after holy Baptism have acquired no stain of sin at all, and those who having incurred the stain of sin are cleansed, are received immediately into heaven.”⁸ This is sometimes called the “particular judgment.”¹ (CCC 1021) **for that is far better**. Paul sees dying as superior to living because he knew that in death he would be spared from the troubles of the world and would see Christ face to face. To be ready to die is to be ready to live for Christ. Once we understand that our purpose in life is to love others as Christ has loved us, then we can devote our life to what really counts without the fear of dying.³

24Yet that I remain in the flesh is more necessary for your benefit. Here Paul is thinking not only of the Philippians, but of all the converts that he has made or can still make for Christ.⁴ (How many people would not be touched if you died today?)

27Only, conduct yourselves in a way worthy of the gospel of Christ. Philippi was a Roman colony and Roman colonies were little bits of Rome planted throughout the world. In these colonies the Roman citizens never forgot that they were Romans. They spoke the Latin language, wore the Latin dress, called their magistrates by the Latin names, insisted on being stubbornly Roman, however far they might be from Rome. So what Paul is saying is this, “You and I know full well the privileges and the responsibilities of being a Roman citizen. You know full well how even in Philippi, so many miles from Rome, you must still live and act as a Roman does. Well then, remember that you have an even higher duty than that. Wherever you are you must live as befits a citizen of the Kingdom of God. You must never forget the privileges and the responsibilities of citizenship of the Kingdom of God and your conduct must befit this citizenship.”⁹ The teachings of the Church make it clear that being a citizen of heaven is quite compatible with being a citizen of human society. We are told in the Vatican II document, *Gaudium et spes*, that “hope in a life to come does not take away from the importance of the duties of this life on earth but rather adds to it by giving new motives for fulfilling those duties.”⁸

Matthew 20:1-16a

Jesus told this story of the workers in the vineyard on the final journey to Jerusalem. We automatically side with the first group of workers until we realize that we are in the LAST group! The outrageous generosity of the landowner parallels God’s outrageous mercy and goodness. God pays us in coin so totally out of proportion to what we can earn that ordinary terms of barter and trade become meaningless. “An honest day’s pay for an honest day’s

work” is completely inadequate to describe our relationship with God. Something more like “An everlasting fortune for a good hearted attempt” is more like it.⁶

Jesus told his disciples this parable: In this story, God is the “estate owner” and the “laborers” are the believers who work in the service of God. The “market place” is the present world, the “wage” is membership in the people of God, and the “evening” is the end of life. In early Christianity there were many who felt superior because of heritage or favored positions. There were those who felt superior because they had spent so much time with Christ and knew so much about him. The message in this story was a reassurance of God’s grace to the new believers.³

1 “The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out at dawn to hire laborers for his vineyard.

2 After agreeing with them for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard.

3 Going out about nine o’clock, the landowner saw others standing idle in the marketplace. 4 and he said to them, ‘You too go into my vineyard, and I will give you what is just.’

5 So they went off. And he went out again around noon, and around three o’clock, and did likewise.

6 Going out about five o’clock, the landowner found others standing around and said to them, ‘Why do you stand here idle all day?’

7 The answered, ‘Because no one has hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You too go into my vineyard.’ The fact that the householder needs more and more workers indicates that harvest-time is near.¹²

8 When it was evening the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, ‘Summon the laborers and give them their pay, At the end of the day there is a settling of accounts and the distribution of rewards which together with the harvest symbolism makes us think of the last judgment.¹² *beginning with the last and ending with the first.*’ The “last” may refer to society’s outcasts with whom Jesus spent a lot of time. Or it may refer to those who first heard the Good News but rejected it, or to those who were considered least likely to have accepted it. It certainly includes us Gentiles. The point is clear. God’s ways are not our ways. He chooses whomever He pleases for whatever purposes. BE PREPARED FOR SURPRISES!⁶

9 When those who had started about five o’clock came, each received the usual daily wage.

10 So when the first came, they thought that they would receive more,

11 but each of them also got the usual wage. And on receiving it they grumbled against the landowner, saying,

12 ‘These last ones worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us, who bore the day’s burden and the heat.’ This parable of the householder refers in particular to Israel’s labor throughout salvation history and climaxes with the inclusion of the Gentiles in the New Covenant. Despite complaints, there is no violation of justice; God is not unfair to Israel, he is simply generous to late- coming Gentiles like ourselves, making them equal members of His people.¹¹

13 He said to one of them in reply, ‘My friend, I am not cheating you. Did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Our reward is not based on length of service nor the hardness of work done

nor the quantity of the accomplishment, but only on the measure of grace bestowed on each one and their cooperation.¹⁰

14Take what is yours and go. What if I wish to give this last one the same as you? Origin (a Father of the Church from Egypt who died in 254 A.D.) wrote that the hours of the workday correspond to stages in life when people turn to God. When converted, they are rescued from idle living to serve Christ in his vineyard, where they harvest much fruit for God before the sun sets on their earthly life. Whether converted early in life or later, all are awarded the generous and equal gift of eternal life.¹¹ Actually, we should not resent anyone who turns to God in the last moments of life because, in reality, no one DESERVES eternal life.

15Or am I not free to do as I wish with my own money? Are you envious because I am generous? A parable is a story that has one main point. It is not like an allegory where every detail has meaning. This is the key line of today's reading because it is all about the generosity of God rather than His justice.¹³

16aThus, the last will be first, and the first will be last." This parable is addressed to the Jewish people, whom God called at an early hour, centuries ago. Now the Gentiles are also being called — with an equal right to form part of the new people of God, the Church. It is a matter of gratuitous, unmerited, invitation; therefore, those who were the "first" to receive the call have no grounds for complaining when God calls the "last" and gives them the same reward — membership of his people. Jesus leaves us in no doubt that although he calls us to follow different ways, all receive the same reward — heaven.¹⁹

Some of the material for this commentary is taken from: (1) "The Catechism of the Catholic Church," (2) "The Commentary Notes of Sean Innerst and Tim Gray," (3) "The Bread of Life Catholic Bible Study" by Deacon Ken & Marie Finn, (4) "The Jerome Biblical Commentary," (5) "Abundant Pardon" April 17, 2007, Catholic Exchange. Your Faith. Your Life. Your World. by Mark Shea, (6) "Workbook For Lectors And Gospel Readers" by Aelred Rosser, (7) "Workbook for lectors and gospel readers" by Martin Connell, (8) "The Navarre Bible: Captivity Epistles," (9) "The Letters To The Philippians, Colossians, And Thessalonians" by William Barclay, (10) "The Parables of Christ" by Charles J. Callan, O.P., (11) "The Ignatius Catholic Study Bible: The Gospel of Matthew," (12) "The Gospel of Matthew" by Daniel J. Harrington, S.J., (13) "Workbook for lectors and gospel readers" by Lawrence E. Mick, (14) "Workbook for lectors and gospel readers" by James L. Weaver, (15) "The Navarre Bible: Major Prophets," (16) The St. Paul Center For Biblical Theology Online founded by Dr. Scott Hahn, (17) "Catholic Source Book " Edited by rev. Peter Klein, (18) "The Ignatius Catholic Study Bible: The Letters of St. Paul to the Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon," and (19) "The Navarre Bible: ST MATTHEW."

In loving memory of Peg Schneller, who originally compiled these commentaries.