

**25<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year A**

**First Reading:** Isaiah 55:6-9  
**Second Reading:** Philippians 1:20-24,27  
**Gospel:** Matthew 20:1-16

In the course of a ward round in the hospital I came across a young man who had just been admitted and was quite ill. He had been told that he would have to undergo a series of tests to try to find a correct diagnosis so he could be treated with the right medication. Tests are something that many patients find difficult. The tests themselves can cause stress but even when they are straightforward there is always a certain amount of anxiety because tests are to investigate the unknown and it is the unknown that will cause people to be afraid. When the results come back there can be great relief even if the news is not particularly good because the patient can at least know what they are dealing with and get on with the business of doing just that.

This young man was glad to receive a visit from a chaplain because he had some questions to ask and he was experiencing some confusion. He told me that the change in the state of his health and the fact that it had landed him in hospital had brought him down to earth with a painful bump. He knew that he was being confronted with the possibility of having to deal with a major illness with all the implications that went with it. For the first time in a long time he was giving serious thought to prayer and simply asking God for help. The reason why he was struggling so much was because he felt guilty about turning to God because he needed something, when before he had almost completely ignored him. He had said his prayers occasionally but rarely went to Mass. He had come to the realisation that he hadn't included God in his life very much at all. Now, he said that he felt like a hypocrite because he was asking the God that he had ignored so much for so long to help him.

This was fairly common complaint from patients and although they would admit that they felt like hypocrites they rarely mentioned another fear that was at the back of their mind and that was that God would reject them or punish them for their lack of faith. They found it hard to accept that God would listen to their prayer because he hadn't heard from them for so long. They also considered

the idea that God was actually already punishing them for their wrongdoing. With all these thoughts swirling around in their heads it would be no surprise that they had added mental and spiritual anguish to their physical discomfort.

When any of us have these thoughts, we are creating an image of God which is a copy of our own image. We forget that we are made in his image. What I mean by this is that we try to second guess how God will react by thinking about how we would react to people who have ignored us or failed to contact us for a long time. We would think about how we would feel if we did so much for someone and they never bothered to take time to say thanks. The temptation would be to write them off, or if they came near us to ask another favour to tear a strip of them, but we are told today that our ways are not God's ways. He operates in a very different way and it can be very hard sometimes for us to accept that. When we turn to God with a humble and contrite heart he will never turn us away. We may sometimes find it hard to forgive and so we think that God is the same and that is when we make God in our image and likeness.

Another example of the forgiveness of God is to be found at the crucifixion when Jesus told the repentant thief that he would be with him that same day in Paradise. This shows us that God's love and mercy can be found in any circumstances as long as there is sincerity and remorse present in the heart of the sinner. Even at the eleventh hour, God's generosity can win through and it is from today's Gospel that the often used phrase "The Eleventh Hour" comes to us. A lot of people are shocked by the evident unfairness and even injustice of the situation that the labourers found themselves in. Trade Unionists would be outraged but Jesus has the knack of turning the world on its head and he certainly does it again in this parable, but it is not just designed to shock but to make people think that God's ways are not our ways and his love, generosity and mercy are open to all, even latecomers.

This parable is good news for all of us, because it means that the love of God is not just always available, it is actually reaching out to us and calling out to us. It is also presenting us with a double challenge, the first being that we need to be loving, forgiving people too. The second is connected to the first, and that is that we should be prepared to forgive ourselves. That is one of the things that the young man in that hospital bed had a problem with and it is a very common complaint

both inside and outside the hospital. Many people are crippled by past sins and mistakes and these are a real block to them living full lives. If we are to believe in a loving God we have to be prepared to forgive ourselves as God has forgiven us. Every saint knew they were a sinner but they were confident of God's love and mercy and that set them free to be the great people they were. It also brought them to understand the full meaning of this parable and it means when Jesus said "Thus, the last will be first and the first will be last."