

FR. JOHN'S HOMILY

Twenty-Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Sept. 20, 2020

How many times have you heard “It’s not fair”? Too many to count myself, growing up in the Marconi household with 7 kids. Some time ago, visiting with family, I got tickled at the uncles every time their nephews and nieces complained. The uncles would sing the old Rolling Stones song, “You Can’t Always Get What You Want”. Their nieces and nephews didn’t like it much! It’s true, we can’t always get what we want. When we hear those words, “It is not fair”, we are judging by our own standards most of the time. Usually when things are not going our way, we say, shout, yell, and complain, “It’s not fair.”

At times we might even say this to God. We need to be reminded that the Gospel is free of charge. Entrance into the kingdom of God is a pure gift, nothing we have merited. God owes us nothing and does not need to lavish on us the love He manifested in Jesus Christ. God is a generous God!

At times of illness, misfortune, or tragedy we may try to bargain with God, to strike a deal and expect God to agree and play fair. Yet God can never be caught in our narrow view of things. We, on the other hand, cannot grasp the greatness of our God and His providence. God has freely entered into a covenant with Israel, and in the passion of Jesus has struck a new covenant in His blood, but He had no need, no obligation, and no duty to come to our rescue. None whatsoever, and yet He generously gives His grace to us.

This should show us how generous God is. We need to look honestly at our jealousies and at the envy we have for other's gifts. These are the enemies that get us to think or feel that life is not fair. Isaiah bids the sinner to abandon his evil

thoughts, but how do you do that? Jealousy and envy may not be things we like to admit even to ourselves, but we know they are there.

One way we as Christians can overcome envious and jealous thoughts is through the contemplation of God's goodness. Gratitude and thankfulness fills a heart in such a way that there is no room for envy or jealousy. Each of us is profoundly and perfectly loved by God, and variously gifted by God.

Isaiah today appears to represent a time near the end of exile when the prophet consoled his people with the hopes of returning. When Jerusalem was destroyed and thousands of Jews were sent on a forced march to Babylonia, Isaiah kept the people of God aware of God's presence. Even though at times it might seemed so, God has not abandoned us, nor forsaken us. A timely message for the Church and the world today.

Isaiah also helped his people to recognize God's hand at work on their behalf from the power of Cyrus, the Persian. Earlier the prophet had described Cyrus as a "bird of prey" called by God to carry out his purpose for his people. Cyrus' victory over Babylonian and his policy of setting free all the foreign exiles enslaved in Babylonia also earned him the title of God's Anointed or Messiah. In a surprising way God used a foreign king to set His people free and allowed them to return home.

In ways and with thoughts that are above human understanding, God remains near. "My ways are not your ways, and my thoughts are not your thoughts," says the Lord. Last week we heard that His mercy and generosity in forgiving has no limits. God continues to offer consolation and peace to all who find themselves in any form of exile.

When Paul wrote to the church he had founded in Philippi, his personal circumstances were anything but ideal. Imprisoned, Paul realized that his incarceration might result in his execution; and he wished to communicate what could have been his final words to those whom he had brought to the faith. Paul could have said, “Life is not fair, God is not fair,” but he did not.

Instead we hear this message from Paul, he begins with a formal greeting and blessing, a prayer of thanksgiving (showing his heart of gratitude), and then the news of his own situation. Because of his unshakable faith in Christ and in the resurrection, Paul did not fear death. In fact, he welcomed it as a passage to a deeper, fuller experience of Christ’s presence.

Listen to his heart full of gratitude and faith, “I do not know which to prefer; I am strongly attracted to both”, whether he lives or whether he dies. The Greek word Paul uses was a term which described someone caught in a narrow passage with a wall of rock in either side. Unable to turn around, the traveler could do nothing else but press forward. This was Paul’s resolve-- to move forward, accepting whatever future his work for Christ and the church would bring. Whether it be death or continued life, Paul was at peace. He invites us, to have a similar outlook toward life and death and to know a similar peace.

Matthew’s parable, which is unique to him, never fails to get us, the listener’s ear, with the seemingly unfair situations. The interaction between the vineyard owner and the workers sets up the two standards, the world’s and God’s. The fact that the workers hired at the eleventh hour received the same wage as those hired first doesn’t seem fair to the ones who have been there all day.

In ancient Palestine, grapes ripened in late September not long before the autumn rains. In order to gather the entire crop before the rain ruined it, frantic

efforts were needed. Every available worker was needed, even if they could only work a short time or even as little as one hour! If the vineyard owner wanted to pay the last as much as the first, then why is this unfair? Depends on whose standard you are measuring by, doesn't it?

This parable offered a lesson in discipleship. We as Christians, in this case the workers in the vineyard, are not to concern ourselves with any reward or payment for our service for God's kingdom. We can look at the denarius as the love we are freely given by God. We don't earn it, we don't deserve it, we don't merit it, God loves us freely. We really need nothing more. The denarius was freely given, God's love is freely given.

Whether we enter into God's vineyard early on or even later, like a death bed Confession, does it really matter? Once we enter into God's presence of eternal love, peace and life, does it really matter? We are called to be thankful that God is a generous God, now we are called to imitate His generosity. Have a heart of gratitude today for God's gift of salvation. We are given it freely; anyone who receives it, receives it as a free gift. Let us rejoice with God for all those who enter the vineyard, paradise, and eternal life. Isn't it great to know God has called us by name to work in His vineyard?