

25th Sunday (A)

24th September 2023

‘The 11th hour’

Is 55: *our God is rich in forgiving* Ps 144: *The Lord is kind and full of compassion*

Phil 1: *Life to me is Christ; death would bring me more*

Mt 20: 1–16: *“Why be envious because I am generous?”*

The other day, Thurs 21st, we had the feastday of St Matthew — the apostle & evangelist — and I thought, how many Scripture passages that are so famous and so precious to us as Christians are only available to us in Matthew’s Gospel! E.g., the Beatitudes; the full breadth of the ‘Sermon on the Mount’; ... and a number of important parables including last Sunday’s (‘the unforgiving servant’), and this Sunday’s and the one next Sunday too! These chapters of St Matthew that we’re hearing from at the moment are full of Jesus’s ‘Parables of the Kingdom,’ teaching us clearly what the nature of God is like, and what He expects of us if we are to enter His Kingdom — i.e. His Church on earth, and His happiness in heaven. Today’s parable, in ch. 20 of Matthew is often referred to as the ‘parable of the vineyard workers,’ but I like to think of it as the *‘parable of the 11th hour’*!

Working as a hospital chaplain in East London as I

did for several years in the early-to-mid 2000s, I hear this Gospel parable speak most naturally to me of ‘death-bed conversions.’ It isn’t such a rare event, that, faced with a serious illness or even impending death, some who have long abandoned the practice of their faith, take the opportunity for sincere and genuine reconciliation — repentance, confession and Holy Communion — perhaps after many years, or even decades. And it’s part of a hospital chaplain’s job not to make that any harder than it already is, but to smooth the way, facilitate it, help the returning Christian to make that return a real moment of grace and spiritual joy. It was a very moving thing to do! This is just the sort of thing Christ is talking about, I think, when he speaks of the labourers whom the landowner hired at the 11th hour (5pm). He kept returning to the market place to find workers: 6am, ... 9am, ... midday, ... 3pm, ... 5pm. He didn’t give up by the middle of the day. Even just an hour before evening He’s still bothering to go out and find more labourers to work in His vineyard.

An 11th-hr invitation in Jesus’s actual ministry that

we will all recognise is that made from the Cross to the thief. This crucified man had lived a criminal life, and was, as he admitted, receiving just punishment for his crimes; he turns to the Lord at the 11th hr — in fact, much later than the 11th hr (the 11th hr, 59th min!) — to appeal for forgiveness. We all know off by heart the earth-shattering response of Jesus: “*Today, you will be with Me in Paradise.*” Maybe it’s because we don’t really tend to think about this thief’s sinful past life that we aren’t as offended by this generosity of God as we are by the 11th-hr workers. Yet it represents the same logic of the Lord: inviting to return; offering constantly the gift of life to anyone ready with ears to hear.

The Lord keeps returning to call us too. He doesn’t get tired of making that insistent call to us: that we may be converted and full of heart start working for His kingdom. It’s never too late. Sometimes I come across the lapsed who say it is too late for them ... but that attitude is shown to be completely wrong by those instead who come back full of joy and gratitude. Some people have just never had

the courage — or never been asked — to come back. We should bear that in mind! Invite people back to the Lord! Help them back — make it as easy as possible for someone to have the chance to come back. Introduce them to a priest, recommend one, accompany them, help them know of the Lord’s mercy. He never shuts the door. Just like the landowner, coming out to the market place time and time again, God keeps on the lookout, and keeps inviting: “Why have you not come in all this time? No-one has hired us.” No-one has asked us!

Note the gripes of those who had worked a long hard day in all the heat: why does he not treat us better? But the fact is, he simply is looking to give *life* to all. What’s the key to this parable today, the ‘Parable of the 11th-hour Vineyard Workers’? It is this: that *1d* was the daily rate for what we’d call today the ‘living wage’ — the minimum on which one could live. So, the labourers hired for the whole day agree to, and receive, this ‘living wage’ ... But then so do all the others: the ones hired mid-morning, the ones hired at midday, the ones hired at the 11th hour. Why

do they receive the same? Because it's the *minimum to live on*, and the Master is caring: He doesn't want to see anyone he's employed starve, even if they've only done 1 hr's work. There's no *injustice* in this; there's just the generosity of the landowner. "*Why be envious, because I am generous?*" he replies to those who gripe about it. God simply wishes the fullness of life for each one of us; for each person on the face of the earth. He does not wish us to starve, spiritually; He wishes us to thrive and have true life. That life can only come through Jesus Christ, whom we embrace by humbly confessing our sins, and then receiving the immense graces of His sacraments, most especially in the food for our souls, His own divine life in the Eucharist.

If we believe and live this, then we will be continually inviting to the Lord — or inviting *back* to the Lord — those we know of who do not know and love Him. This is our labouring in His vineyard: our working for the kingdom. Never regret that you have worked for the Kingdom long and hard in your life: whether from

daybreak, or from the 3rd or 6th hour of your life ... Never have a gripe that others may join, or be reconciled, late in life: instead, rejoice that they have had the chance and the courage to do so. Perhaps if you hadn't worked long and hard from the beginning, they couldn't have been reconciled at the 11th hour. So: you were made to belong to the Kingdom; work for it with all your heart and all your strength. And welcome with joy those even who hear the call to be with the Lord at the last moment. The angels rejoice in heaven over one repentant sinner: so should we!

At the outset of this new academic year, whether you have been labouring in the vineyard of the Lord all your life, faithful since childhood, and never missed a Sunday ... or whether it's all rather new to you, this choosing to set foot into the kingdom (maybe it's even your first time, ever, today, at Catholic Mass — who knows?); either way, the Lord calls you here, and wants you here. He is generous, and wants you to receive from His hand the living wage, the wage of a fulfilling spiritual life. So, whether we are seasoned Catholics, or fresh and new

Catholics, or refreshed and renewed Catholics, or not-yet Catholics but interested-in-being Catholics, the Master of the Vineyard is calling us in to His service, and that will mean constantly looking out for, and inviting, new workers into His Vineyard. We want to be continually building up this Chaplaincy into a powerhouse for the Kingdom. And for your part that really does mean not just plodding faithfully to Sunday Mass here; it means bringing others to Newman House, to experience what it means to be working with and for Jesus; working for eternal life for yourself and for lots and lots of others. The Lord has plenty of *1d*! He has a limitless supply of the ‘living wage,’ so we should help Him to be generous, by extending that generous invitation of His. Don’t be lazy about this task, but decide that this academic year you’ll be pro-active about bringing your friends and acquaintances to Mass; bring them to experience the life we enjoy in Jesus, the deep peace and spiritual joy that we have because we pray and give our lives to Christ above all things. Don’t think that this is beyond you, or that it’s really someone else’s job, or Fr

Philip’s job. No, I can’t do that for you! You have to be out there in the market place finding those standing idly around on the periphery of the Church, and bring them ungrudgingly, patiently, generously, in. Let’s never be accused by the Lord that someone we know of could honestly say, “No-one has asked us.” Let’s bravely do the asking; let’s patiently do the inviting. Let’s pack out this portion of the Lord’s Vineyard, this Chaplaincy, with eager workers for the Kingdom, ‘old hands’ and ‘new arrivals’ equally. Fresh term, fresh blood, fresh faces ... However new you are to faith, to the Church, to the university, to London, to Newman House, invite others here to Mass, and let the Lord set them on fire for His sacred work. What better use of our life is there, than that?