



- ◆ **“God’s ways are not our ways.”**
- ◆ **Are we envious when God is generous to the so-called undeserving?**
- ◆ **For Paul, “life is Christ.”**

This week’s readings give us much to ponder.

First Reading (Is 55:6-9): “God’s ways are not our ways.”

The following are some comments on three verses from today’s first reading. The reading begins with these words:

***“Seek the Lord while he may be found
... and while he is still near.”***

These words seem to imply that God is moving soon and that we may not be able to find him. Of course this is not what the ancient prophet is saying to the people of his time. God can always be found and he is always near, but our dulled hearts may not recognize his presence. Perhaps the writer is telling us to “seek God while we have some spiritual sense in us; seek him before we lose all belief in him.”

The above is so true when we consider that a time may come when we will have little or no desire to seek the Lord. Our spiritual self will become dulled. Please, God, don’t let that ever happen to us. But, sadly, it does happen. Lots of people, raised Catholic—maybe some in our own family—now have little or no interest in God or religion. Such a situation does not come about overnight. It happens gradually. *Gradually*, attention to spiritual things is replaced by interest in material things. It may even be safe to say that while still attending church, we are losing God. We may only be going through the motions. Our religious faith may not be impacting the way we are living our daily lives, as in the following examples:

- We do not consult God before we make important decisions.
- We may be carrying a hard heart towards an individual and doing little or nothing to correct it.
- We may be quite judgmental of others and feel it is no big deal.

- We may have a grave dislike for certain groups of people, e.g., immigrants—particularly undocumented immigrants—and feel there is nothing immoral about having such thoughts.
- We may have little or no ability to trust God about difficult issues, especially as regards the future.
- We may be greedy with our financial resources.

In short, there may be a big disconnect between our faith life and our everyday life.

A big piece of ‘seeking God’ consists in allowing his values to impact the way we live our daily lives.

Reflection questions:

1. **Would you say that you are currently a seeker of God and his ways?**
2. **What can help you to improve this aspect of your spiritual life?**
3. **What can hinder you from being a seeker of God and his ways?**

***“Let the scoundrel forsake his way and
the wicked his thoughts.”***

I assume that most, if not all, of the time, we see the scoundrel as someone else. God knows just who are those people who fit the label ‘scoundrel.’

- Those who plot evil, e.g., terrorists
- Those who take advantage of the disadvantaged, e.g., employers who pay grossly unfair wages to illegal immigrants
- Those whose pastime is tearing down others and imputing to them the worst motives.

Having said that, it is probably wise for us to recognize that there is a bit of a scoundrel in all of us. You may have heard the following saying:

***There is so much good in the worst of us and so
much bad in the best of us that it ill behooves
any of us to judge the rest of us.***

Before God, we *are* all sinners—scoundrels in need of his mercy.

Reflection question: Is it easy or hard for us to see the scoundrel part of ourselves?

***“My thoughts are not your thoughts nor
are my ways your ways.”***

It has been said that if you wish to deal with God, you have to be prepared to encounter a ‘God of surprises.’

The first reading in the Sunday lectionary is chosen to harmonize with the theme of the Gospel. Today's Gospel is a concrete example of how God's thoughts/ways are discernibly incompatible with ours.

God's surprising ways can bring us great joy or great pain. The joy can be as mundane as our favorite sports team winning a game when everyone thinks they are going to lose. Another example might be a woman who believes she would never get married but then meets the man of her dreams in a very surprising way.

On the flip side, a 'terrible surprise' might be finding out that a loved one has Stage 4 cancer. Or a loved one dies suddenly. Or some disaster befalls us or someone close to us. Coping with the terrible surprises of God is surely one of the biggest challenges in our lives. We understandably raise our eyes and hands to God and question: "God, what are you up to?" In difficult times, when life makes no sense, we might do well to ponder on this beautiful poem:

The Weaver

*My life is but a weaving
between my Lord and me.
I cannot choose the colors
He worketh steadily.
Oft times He weaveth sorrow
and I in foolish pride
forget He sees the upper,
and I, the underside.
Not till the loom is silent
and the shuttles cease to fly,
shall God unroll the canvas
and explain the reason why.
The dark threads are as needful
in the Weaver's skillful hand
as the threads of gold and silver
in the pattern He has planned.*

(Author Unknown)

When we have a hard time figuring out God's strange ways, we can be certain that Satan's goal is to use the painful circumstances in our lives to distance us from God. But God wants to use those same events to draw us closer to him. With God's grace, the support of faith friends, and our own determination, we can allow the difficult circumstances to draw us closer to God.

Reflection questions:

1. Can you name a time when God pleasantly surprised you?
2. What helps you to deal with the unpleasant surprises of life?

Second Reading (Phil 1:20-24,27): "For me, life is Christ."

This is an amazing reading dealing with the sense of detachment from this world and the life that Paul experiences. Paul is writing from prison.

It is fair to say that while we all want to go to heaven, few of us are prepared to go today, or next week, or even next year, for that matter. In other words, most, if not all of us, have a strong attachment to this world and to our lives here on earth.

Not so with Paul. Very succinctly, he says: "*For me life is Christ, and death is gain.*" For Paul, dying tonight would be a blessing because it would bring him into the *visible* presence of Christ. The only positive thing about staying in this world is that it would give him more time to share the Good News of Christ with others. "*If I go on living in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me.*"

Paul adds: "*I am caught between the two. I long to depart this life and be with Christ, for that is far better. Yet that I remain in the flesh is more necessary for your benefit.*"

Reflection question:

Paul's attitude towards death is quite astounding. What might we do to move in that direction, to be able to say: "For me, to live is Christ. Death is gain."

Gospel (Matt 20:16): "Are you envious because I am generous?"

Today's parable is perhaps the most puzzling and disliked parables in the Bible on account of a perceived unfairness. Workers who toiled all day received the same pay as those hired later in the day who worked for only an hour or two. Not only that, but the latter were paid first.

Scholars say that Jesus told this parable in response to a question Peter raised on behalf of the other Apostles: "What reward would they receive for giving up everything to work in the Lord's vineyard? The question seems to imply that perhaps the Apostles would receive *more* than those who came into the Lord's vineyard late in life.

Jesus' response to Peter takes the form of a parable—just like last week. Jesus also told a parable when Peter raised a question about forgiveness.

The parable is about a landowner who hires workers at five different times of the day. In the parable, no one is lazy. The workers hired last may not be as skilled or as good as those hired earlier. But they still want to work.

Otherwise, they would not have hung around the whole time.

The parable reaches its crescendo when all the workers come together to receive their wages. The first surprise element is when the owner calls up the last workers to come out to be paid first. The second surprise element (many of Jesus' parables have a surprise element) is when those who went out last receive the same wage as those who went out earlier. This is when the grumbling starts. The early workers automatically assume that they would be paid *more* than those who went out much later—just as Peter assumed that he and the other Apostles would receive a greater reward for giving everything up to follow Jesus. The early workers are misguided in their thinking that an injustice has been done to them. The truth is they got paid the wage agreed upon. So really their gripe is about the landowner's *generosity* towards the late workers.

We can say that the poisonous sin of envy rose up within the early workers on seeing that the latecomers received just as much pay as they did. It never dawned on them to say: "What a generous boss we have, paying a full day's wage for a few hours of work. He knows we can't feed our family on two hours of wages so he gives each one a full day's wage. What a great guy!" The early workers could not speak such words of praise because they are so consumed by what they perceive as a great injustice done to them.

Commenting on this parable, John Shea writes: *The feeling of unfairness springs from a well-constructed mental tape. Its basic message is: "If someone gets what I am getting but hasn't put in as much work as I have, I am being cheated. Is there any other way to see this?" Most of us have this tape running continually. This makes us, in the language of the parable, grumble-ready.*

So if we have been faithful to God all our lives, we should not complain if very late arrivals to God and his ways get the same nice apartment as us in heaven. We must never forget that the only reason we have known and loved God longer than others is because of *God's* mercy and goodness. None of us *EARN* heaven by pulling ourselves up by our own bootstraps.

We do not gain heaven with good works but rather by opening our hearts to God's saving grace. Whether we have served him from sunrise to sunset or enlisted for service only at the eleventh hour, God blesses us with his bounty not because we have earned his goodness, but because of who he is, namely, a God of mercy and compassion.

Reflection questions

1. Have you ever been resentful because God seems to favor others over you? Does such a resentment reveal ingratitude for what God has given you?
2. Do you ever struggle with the issue of fairness, e.g., bad and irreligious people doing well, while really good people experience pain and hardship?

Envy, one of the Seven Capital or Deadly Sins

A deadly sin is raised mentioned in today's Gospel when early morning workers are filled with *envy* upon learning that the late workers are paid just as much as they.

Some sins are called 'deadly' because they can lead to other sins. Our Church speaks of seven deadly or capital sins: pride, greed, wrath, envy, lust, gluttony, and sloth.

Gratefully, I rarely feel envious of others. It is a grace and the result, I believe, of being very thankful for the multitude of blessings I have in my life—all undeserved but present nonetheless. So from a personal point of view, I cannot offer much advice on this vice. Having said that, I am not too sure that I would not have shared the unhappy feeling of the early morning workers on being paid the same wage as the late workers.

I think that when an envious feeling rises up in us, we lose sight of the blessings in *our* lives. I do realize that it may be very difficult to rejoice with a co-worker who gets a promotion to a position that I had my eye on—or worse still, if I get a demotion. Life can seem very unfair at times but we have to deal with it or else envy or bitterness may eat us up. We must do everything in our power to fight off the poisonous vices that can wreak havoc on our spirit.

Have a blessed week,

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Are those two of the greatest ushers we've ever had, or what?