

[Spirituality](#)



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by Thomas Gumbleton

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I've never read that Gospel without people objecting. How can that be? How can it be just? It seems so obvious — those who worked 11 or 12 long hours in the heat of the day and they get the same amount as someone who came in at the last hour. How can that be just? If we listen deeply to all of our lessons today, I think we'll get a deeper understanding of how this parable really does reflect, as Jesus said, it was a story to explain the reign of God.

Twenty-fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Isaiah 55:6-9

Psalms 25:2-3; 8-9; 17-18

Philippians 1:20-24, 27a

Matthew 20:1-16a

[The full text of the readings](#)

The story does help to do that if we hear it in the context, especially of our first lesson where God is calling back the chosen people through the words of the prophet Isaiah, "Turn back to God. Now is the time. Turn back to God." Because as Isaiah says, "Let the wicked abandon their way, let them forsake their thoughts, let them turn to God, for God will have mercy. For our God is generous. For my thoughts are not your thoughts, my ways are not your ways. For as the heavens are above the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts above your thoughts."

God's ways are so different from ours. Isaiah is trying to say it's almost beyond our imagination — higher than the heavens are above the earth. That's what we experience if we listen deeply to the Gospel message of Jesus if we've been following his life because there are certain times where incidents happen that remind us that God's ways are not our ways. You may remember the story of the young man who came up to Jesus and said, "What do I have to do to earn eternal life?" Jesus said, "Keep the commandments." He said, "I've done that since my youth." "Okay," Jesus says, "Go, sell everything you have. ... Come and follow me; live my way."

Or you think of the example of Peter when Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem and he said, "When I get there, they're going to hand me over to my enemies, they're going to torture me and put me to death." Peter speaks up and says to Jesus, "No, don't go to allow yourself to be put to death and to love them as they do it. No, we can organize against them." Do you remember what Jesus does? He gets angry with Peter, "Get behind me, you Satan!"

In fact, he's saying to Peter, "Look, I'm following God's ways and God's ways are not your ways. I will go to Jerusalem, allow myself to be tortured, executed, but still love those who are doing it. My ways are not your ways." Even at the last moment or close to the last hours of the life of Jesus in the garden when he's being captured, one of the disciples takes out his sword and wants to defend Jesus who's innocent. Jesus said, "Put away your sword. Those who live by the sword will die by the sword." So he allows himself to be taken and tortured and murdered; and he still loves them.

Today's parable — it's showing what Jesus meant for the young man. You don't earn anything from God. Whatever you receive is a gift, whether you begin at the first hour or the last hour, you are being gifted. God is giving you everything. You wouldn't exist if God's love hadn't called you into being. You wouldn't survive a moment, a second, an instant unless God's love was always there sustaining you. There's no way you can earn that. God first loved us and that's the truth. God's ways are not our ways. God doesn't wait for us to earn anything; God loves us.

Of course we should be trying to follow this way of God as lived out by Jesus. The first Christians had difficulty with it. In the early part of the letter of St. Paul to the church at Corinth, he's obviously dealing with this same kind of question. He has to tell them that when Jesus was handed over and didn't resist, people thought it was foolish. When Jesus loved those who were putting him to death, they thought it was a scandal.

Paul says to the church in Corinth, "To the Jews it's a scandal." They can't accept a God who will not overwhelm God's enemies and destroy them. To them that's a scandal. What kind of a God is that? But then to the wise (the Greeks, Paul calls them), it's sheer foolishness. But then Paul says, echoing the words of Jesus, "The foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength." That's what will change our world so that gradually

our world becomes the reign of God.

So we can learn, in a very powerful way today, this lesson that God's ways are not our ways; God's thoughts are not our thoughts. I gave you some examples from the Scriptures. But in our everyday life, if we listen deeply to Jesus, we discover that in many ways our everyday lives are not following God's ways or God's thoughts. In our individual personal lives where God asks us, for example, if your brother or sister has something against you, even if you're offering a gift at the altar, go first and be reconciled.

How often do we reach out to be the first to try to heal a rift in one of our relationships, be the one who tries to bring about the reconciliation? Or do we hold grudges? Or do we expect people to earn what we bestow upon them? Or are we willing just to give and share whatever we have as Jesus taught us? Blessed are the poor in spirit — those who know what they have is a gift and are willing to share it so everyone has a full chance for a full life.

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But this past week there was a way in which God's ways were totally ignored in a very threatening, frightening way. You may remember when President [Donald] Trump spoke at the United Nations. He said, talking about North Korea, "We will have no choice but to totally destroy North Korea." The reporter said, "There were gasps in the hall: A forum for peace was used to threaten to annihilate a nation of 25 million people." If we have any understanding of what happened at Hiroshima or Nagasaki, we immediately know that can't be the way of God. Even to threaten to do that is wrong; it's sinful. Yet that's where our nation is.

Back in the early 1980s (I want to make the point that this is not new), the United States bishops were writing a pastoral letter about the way to peace. The committee met with the leaders of our government. One of the meetings was with Caspar Weinberger. He was the secretary of defense. I was part of the group. We asked Mr. Weinberger, "Will we really use those weapons that we threaten our enemies with?" In a very quiet, gentle voice (he was a very soft-spoken person), he said, "We don't want to, but when we have to we will." He meant it. That's a sin beyond belief, beyond comprehension. It's not the way of Jesus. It's not the way of the Gospels. Yet, it goes on and we don't protest. We don't find some ways to try to

change that policy of our nation.

So there are large ways and small ways in which, if we listen to the Scriptures, we find that our ways are not God's ways. It's important for us then, above all else, to listen deeply every week to the Scriptures, especially to the Gospel where we hear the words of Jesus, see the example of Jesus, and determine that because Jesus is following God's ways, we, too, will try to follow him, listen to what he says, watch how he acts, and then as he said to his disciples, "Come and follow me." As our Gospel lesson says today, that's how we will bring the reign of God about — by trying to follow God's ways, not our ways.

[Homily given Sept 24 at St. Philomena Parish in Detroit. The transcripts of Bishop Thomas Gumbleton's homilies are [posted weekly](#) to NCRonline.org. [Sign up here](#) to receive an email alert when the latest homily is posted.]