

# BIBLICAL PAGES

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## Jesus' places and relations

### Lectio n° 4

#### A vineyard and many people called

Jesus does not speak directly about work-related issues, but He reveals that work is a fundamental and symbolic experience, allowing man to detect the growth of the Kingdom in reality and to relate 'healthily' both with reality itself, seen as a gift, and with God, as well as with his brothers and sisters.

In Jesus' parable, the workplace becomes a place of confrontation and encounter with a 'master', a 'king', or simply a 'man', in whom Jesus reveals Himself and the Father. He is also a 'husband' to be awaited, a giver of goods who asks us to keep watch over others, to protect them in order for them to bear fruit... We must re-learn faithfulness as a concrete task in time and space: its scope surpasses both, given that they must be put in relation with a superior, ultimate reality, involving a relationship with the true Good.

We often find ourselves in a vineyard, as in the text we are dealing with today. Throughout the whole Scriptures, the vineyard is the symbol of Israel, a place God favours and that must bear fruit; but also a place of infidelity to the task God assigned them. The vineyard is a place each of us has been called to go, at one hour or the other.

#### Let us invoke the Holy Spirit

*Holy Spirit of God,*

*give me a heart ready to listen.*

*Ensure that I do not place obstacles*

*to the Word coming from God's mouth.*

*May this Word not return to Him*

*without having worked in me what He desires*

*and without having accomplished*

*what You sent it for.*

*(Card. Carlo Maria Martini)*

### 1. Lectio

(to read the Word / to listen to it)

#### Matthew 20:1-16

*1 'Now the Kingdom of Heaven is like a landowner going out at daybreak to hire workers for his vineyard. 2 He made an agreement with the workers for one denarius a day and sent them to his vineyard. 3 Going out at about the third hour he saw others standing idle in the market place 4 and said to them, "You go to my vineyard too and I will give you a fair wage." 5 So they went. At about the sixth hour and again at about the ninth hour, he went out and did the same. 6 Then, at about the eleventh hour he went out and found more standing around, and he said to them, "Why have you been standing here idle all day?" 7 "Because no one has hired us," they answered. He said to them, "You go into my vineyard too."*

*8 In the evening, the owner of the vineyard said to his bailiff, "Call the workers and pay them their wages, starting with the last arrivals and ending with the first." 9 So those who were hired at about the eleventh hour came forward and received one denarius each. 10 When the first came, they expected to get more, but they too received one denarius each. 11 They took it, but grumbled at the landowner saying, 12 "The men*

*who came last have done only one hour, and you have treated them the same as us, though we have done a heavy day's work in all the heat."*

*13 He answered one of them and said, "My friend, I am not being unjust to you; did we not agree on one denarius? 14 Take your earnings and go. I choose to pay the lastcomer as much as I pay you. 15 Have I no right to do what I like with my own? Why should you be envious because I am generous?" 16 Thus the last will be first, and the first, last.'*

Let us approach the text.

In verse 16 the speech is concluded (closed quotation marks). Why weren't the quotation marks closed in the previous verse? This is not a mistake. In fact, Jesus' speech opened in the previous chapter (19:28) as a response to St Peter's question: "Look, we have left everything and followed You. What are we to have, then?" (19:27).

In the 'palingenesis' ('regeneration') – Jesus answers – in the renewal of heart and mind, in a new harmony, he who leaves everything will find himself within a circle of expanded and multiplied love (19:29), as His partner in love (19:28).

In this context, the parable we are meditating now seems to be aimed at translating into a simple language the new logic and harmony of the expansion: from a small seed, the Kingdom grows into a vineyard, a new way of relating to God and to others.

The parable is about 'work'. The place of work is the vineyard. There is a master, through whom Jesus lets us have a glimpse of the Father and, in a way, of Himself too. He explains to St Peter how His collaborators should be, and what their compensation is, and finally what relationship should exist among them.

Verses 19:30 and 20:16 constitute an inclusion, through which the two chapters are linked to each other: "Many who are first will be last, and the last, first." "Thus the last will be first, and the first, last."

Broadening our gaze, on another level we can have a glimpse of the situation of St Matthew's community. We can guess that there could have been arguments between the first Jewish groups (the workers of the first hour) and the converts from paganism (those of the last hour), the latter being called and treated before God in the same way as the former.

Let us divide the text into its parts:

- 1 Introduction;
- 2-7 The calling;
- 8-10 The salary;
- 11 Grumbling;
- 12-15 Answer;
- 16 Conclusion.

### Introduction

*I 'Now the Kingdom of Heaven is like a landowner going out at daybreak to hire workers for his vineyard.*

The text opens with "Now" / "In fact", as to connect it to the preceding text and to refer it to the 'Kingdom of Heaven'. This term is used by St Matthew, while St Luke and St Mark make use of the term, 'Kingdom of God'. It refers to a dynamic reality (13:31-33), already present in their midst.

Thus, if we interpret "Now" / "In fact" as referring to the 'palingenesis' of the previous chapter, we will deduce that the Kingdom of Heaven is a reality tending towards the fulfilment of a new logic, precisely towards a regeneration which is in progress, as a progressive implementation of God's Lordship as well as of liberated and renewed relationships, an implementation of God's logic, as shown concretely in the parable. Let us see how...

"...is like / is similar...". The Kingdom of Heaven cannot be defined in exact terms, then the similitude becomes necessary. The situation that can make it comprehensible is an event, whose protagonist is a 'master' in action. What does he do?

He goes out. The Greek text literally says, “He went out together at dawn”. The term for ‘dawn’ is ‘proi’ and is used by St Matthew in 16:3 and 27:1, while in the parallel passages of St Luke we find the term ‘orthros’. ‘Proi’ can be found also in the Psalms: 90:14; 92:3; 143:8, similarly referring to the time of God’s grace, of His love in which we do confide. It is the ‘fourth vigil’, ie between three o’clock in the morning and six o’clock. The master here is compared to the sun, who “goes out” (Ps 119), who rises as “the sun of justice” (Mal 3:20), “rising on the bad as well as the good” (Mt 5:45). The master goes out, inaugurating a new day of justice and grace and mercy (Mt 5:45).

He is looking for workers for his vineyards. He wants someone to work for him by the day. The place of work is his vineyard.

We can find many references to the vineyard both in the Old and in the New Testament, as it has a great symbolic relevance throughout Scripture. The Lord rebukes those who have devastated the vineyard (Is 3:41; Jr 12:10), because she is the house of Israel, His beloved one even though she is unfaithful and He has to punish her (Is 5:7); languishing (Is 24:7); the delightful vineyard (Is 27:2) for which the Lord weeps (Jr 48:32).

In Mt 21:28-41 and in the parallel passages of Mk (12:1-9) and Lk (20:9-16), the vineyard will be taken away from the wicked vinedressers who want to keep the fruit and the vineyard itself for themselves by killing the owner’s son.

However, the vineyard will be finally explained in John 15:1: Jesus reveals that the Father is the vinedresser and He is the true vine, “the faithful one” in opposition to Israel, the unfaithful one; but also that, since He is the Son, He is capable of giving life to those who remain grafted onto Him.

Here in our text, Jesus hides the Father as well as Himself in the plot of the parable, which begins with “going out” in order to find someone that may be involved in His work and in His things.

### The calling

*2 He made an agreement with the workers for one denarius a day and sent them to his vineyard. 3 Going out at about the third hour he saw others standing idle in the market place 4 and said to them, “You go to my vineyard too and I will give you a fair wage.” 5 So they went. At about the sixth hour and again at about the ninth hour, he went out and did the same. 6 Then, at about the eleventh hour he went out and found more standing around, and he said to them, “Why have you been standing here idle all day?” 7 “Because no one has hired us,” they answered. He said to them, “You go into my vineyard too.”*

He goes out many times, at different hours of the day, and he always sees someone who is unemployed, who is in need. Need for work but also need to find a meaning, need to find a role in the social context.

Men are called to work in his own vineyard, and they are always called to play a part in the growth of the master’s wealth, and to receive a wage at the end of the workday (as it is said in the first calling), not to be paid by the hour; and they will receive what is fair (as it is said in the second calling).

The work that in Genesis was “cultivating and keeping the garden” was a task providing meaning to man, and therefore it fulfilled a profound need.

In these verses the owner goes out and always sees to the profound need of individuals, by involving everyone, at any time, sending them into his vineyard / garden. To send is rendered in Greek by the verb ‘apostello’ as in Mt 10:5, where Jesus sends the twelve.

The will of the master seems to be not only to no longer see unemployed people in the places that he visits when he goes to town, but to have collaborators... And he goes out specifically to pay them what is fair. But what is that ‘fair wage’?

### The salary

*8 In the evening, the owner of the vineyard said to his bailiff, “Call the workers and pay them their wages, starting with the last arrivals and ending with the first.” 9 So those who were hired at about the eleventh hour came forward and received one denarius each. 10 When the first came, they expected to get more, but they too received one denarius each.*

To pay the salary starting with the last ones (those hired at the eleventh hour, ie five o'clock pm) means that they who were last are now the first. The salary they receive is a denarius. Those who were hired at the first hour receive a denarius too. That is the pay for a day's work, the fair amount they have agreed to receive. There is no fraud. But why does the owner pay them the salary publicly? Perhaps that is the cornerstone of the parable. Perhaps Jesus wants us to understand that the fair wage is the same for everyone. But what does the money given by the owner represent in an existential sense, in relation to the need that he wanted to satisfy? In relation to the reward St Peter demanded from Jesus in the previous chapter? It seems that the salary, the fair wage, consists in having a share in the goods of the Master, in cooperating with Him, to establish a communion with His things and, ultimately, with His life.

### Grumbling

*11 They took it, but grumbled at the landowner saying,*

And yet, not so subtly, grumbling is circulating. The Greek verb 'egoggizon' is an imperfect tense, denoting a continuous action. And the reason for the grumbling is that the master rewarded the first workers exactly as the last ones. It is indeed difficult to understand the master's logic, it doesn't add up for the workers. In fact, grumbling is an ever present attitude in all communities, starting with St Peter's request and going on with St Matthew's community and up to our very days, in the closet of the ecclesial communities. But let us go back to the key question: what is the fair wage as intended by the master of the parable, that Jesus wants to clarify by showing the behaviours respectively of the master and of the workers? What does it have to do with the Kingdom of Heaven, with 'palingenesis'?

### Answer

*12 "The men who came last have done only one hour, and you have treated them the same as us, though we have done a heavy day's work in all the heat."*

*13 He answered one of them and said, "My friend, I am not being unjust to you; did we not agree on one denarius? 14 Take your earnings and go. I choose to pay the lastcomer as much as I pay you. 15 Have I no right to do what I like with my own? Why should you be envious because I am generous?"*

What is the master's "own"?

He starts to answer by calling his interlocutor, "My friend", then he goes on to explain that he is free and can do what he likes with his own.

'Friend' is rendered with 'etairè', that can be found in St Matthew's Gospel also in 22:12 and 26:50, that is, respectively, in the parable of the wedding guests (where he reproaches one of them who is not wearing the wedding garment); and in Jesus' arrest, when He calls Judas "friend". In both cases it is connected to a reproach. St Luke and St John make use of the term 'philos' instead. The latter denotes affinity, while the former ('etairè') refers to a friend as partner, collaborator.

In St Matthew this partnership is missing in all the cases that he presents. As if the Lord wanted to say: after working so much, after collaborating together, after been in 'my own things', you have not understood anything about me. The reproach is addressed to the guest without a wedding garment; to Judas; to the grumbling workers. "Not because I have hidden myself from you, but because you have an evil eye; because I am good" (Dt 15:9; Mt 6:23).

The consequence of all that is that fairness is defined by the Master's goodness. He does not give a little more or a little less depending on the cases, but the fair wage is His indivisible goodness. "His own things" are equal to the whole of His Self.

Now, moving from the parable to Jesus' answer to St Peter, the work's wage is God's salvation, to be regarded as sharing the work, communion in the Kingdom to come, gift of self.

"Only ONE is good," Jesus said to the rich young man (Mt 19:17). One, not pieces to be distributed.

## Conclusion

*16 Thus the last will be first, and the first, last.'*

The last will be first and the first, last. As far as man's need to work is concerned, which seemed to be what prompted the master to call all the unemployed men, the last one had to wait for longer, and suffered more from unemployment. Therefore, if we try to see things according to God's perspective (He went out and looked for all that were in need), the last one had the same need of the first, in fact even a greater need, as they had to wait for longer.

The evil eye, on the contrary, does not judge according to somebody else's need, but according to one's own selfishness.

Then, what does God's fairness consist in? He behaves consistently with His Being, free from any influence, not according to what is human custom but according to His own being: Goodness.

The evil eye is the eye which becomes alien to the Good who is ONE, all in all, communion which does not uniform men but which gives herself utterly wholly: what is fair in God's eyes. And here is the new day of justice, inaugurated by the Master going out like the sun. This is the regeneration, the progressive fulfilment of God's Lordship through new and liberating relations, even though grumbling is even present in the background and ever informs our gaze, our words, like those of the vineyard workers and of St Peter

Jesus said that there would be an expansion, a multiplication of goods for all those who left everything for His name. His own, the last ones God called, will be the first and will have a share in the spreading of the love of Christ, as opposed to the first called, Israel, God's beloved vineyard. The pagans too, called subsequently, were the last who, like His disciples, like the factions of St Matthew's community, would get salvation, the whole of God's gift, not just a little bit depending on the hours worked.

The workplace, the vineyard, the different callings at different hours, the equal salary, define the work as a universal vocation to take part in God's Kingdom, as a meaning for life, as the deepest need of the human heart in search, constituted by receiving and participating in the ONE, the Good and His things.

## **2. Meditatio**

**(to meditate on the Word / to let it resound)**

- How much do we feel challenged by Jesus? How much do we perceive ourselves as free or, on the contrary, as people chained to the principle of fair reward, of meritocracy?

- Is our assessment of our selves based on the judgement of our actions or rather on the fact that each and everyone has God as his / her deepest need and therefore is entitled to receive Him, the same for each and everyone?

- We should let ourselves be engaged in God's work, then; not remain in our own 'nonsense', thus refusing the place that God has in store for us in His vineyard. But we should abandon all protagonism, every false superiority, and welcome the equality of our deep beings before God, in spite of all the differences that we as creatures have: different feelings, desires, expectations.

- Each of us, after working on this text, may be called to work in the vineyard... Concretely, for example, by going on a 'pilgrimage', distancing herself from the Ego and going back to the depths of her heart, where God dwells.

Perhaps during this Jubilee, we are called to this little / great pilgrimage, progressing on the path of the transformation of the Ego into Jesus' feelings, into Jesus' affections, into Jesus' gaze, into Him who is the Image of God, and the true deep identity towards which we tend, looking forward to the Encounter with Him and the unification of our deepest core. This is the hardest task at each and every hour.

### **3. Oratio** **(to pray the Word / to repeat it)**

*In Your vineyard, Lord,  
there is room for everyone.  
You do not like to see those  
who waste their life and time,  
between boredom and melancholy.  
In this world there is always something to do  
to make it more beautiful, good and colourful.  
You always send Your invitation, again and again,  
and You do not watch  
who comes first and who comes afterwards.  
For those who are there,  
You have the same infinite reward ready:  
to be in Your company,  
in the company of You who are the Master  
but live for Your servants  
and share everything with them.  
Amen.*

### **4. Contemplatio** **(to contemplate the Word / silence)**

Let us allow our gaze to be changed by Jesus, so that contemplating may mean looking with the same benevolent and magnanimous gaze of God.

### **5. Collatio** **(to share the Word)**

Let us share the fruit of our prayer on the Word, being equal Sisters called to commit themselves for free to the growth of God's love in this world.