



Bible Reflection on Vocations

September 2017 — Expectations

1. *Read*

Matthew 20:1-16a

Jesus told his disciples this parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out at dawn to hire laborers for his vineyard. After agreeing with them for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. Going out about nine o’clock, the landowner saw others standing idle in the marketplace, and he said to them, ‘You too go into my vineyard, and I will give you what is just.’ So they went off. And he went out again around noon, and around three o’clock, and did likewise. Going out about five o’clock, the landowner found others standing around, and said to them, ‘Why do you stand here idle all day?’ They answered, ‘Because no one has hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You too go into my vineyard.’ When it was evening the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, ‘Summon the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and ending with the first.’ When those who had started about five o’clock came, each received the usual daily wage. So when the first came, they thought that they would receive more, but each of them also got the usual wage. And on receiving it they grumbled against the landowner, saying, ‘These last ones worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us, who bore the day’s burden and the heat.’ He said to one of them in reply, ‘My friend, I am not cheating you. Did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Take what is yours and go. What if I wish to give this last one the same as you? Or am I not free to do as I wish with my own money? Are you envious because I am generous?’ Thus, the last will be first, and the first will be last.”

(Gospel Reading of the 25th Sunday in Ordinary Time –
Cycle A, September 24, 2017)

2. Meditate

The parable of the workers in the vineyard is actually the conclusion of a longer section of the Gospel of Matthew (19:16-20:16) which begins with Jesus' encounter with a rich young man (19:16-22; see also Mark 10:17-22; Luke 18:18-23). The narrative insists that, in order to enter the Kingdom of Heaven, one must first give up everything (including riches) and to trust exclusively in God.

Matthew's Jewish-Christian audience was interested in knowing the relationship between Jesus and the Torah (the Jewish law). The rich young man is portrayed as a pious Jew who is faithful in his observance of the Jewish law and yet feels that something is missing. Jesus' invitation, however, is not what the young man expects. It is obviously too much for him to accept. Jesus indicates that Christian discipleship goes beyond the observance of the Torah.

Giving up wealth and an attachment to earthly goods is a condition for becoming "perfect" – which in this case does not mean "innocent" or "sinless" but rather "whole," "undivided" or "mature." All who strive to enter the Kingdom of God have to choose between God and whatever might compete with God for their attention – including wealth, power and success.

The rich young man was not expecting an invitation to give up his wealth, and so he turned away from Jesus and the Kingdom of God. In contrast, Matthew the Publican – who was viewed as a sinner and could hardly have expected an invitation to be a disciple – gave up his wealth and his job in order to follow Jesus (Matthew 9:9).

After the story of the rich young man, the Gospel of Matthew presents a conversation on wealth (19:23-30), which can be a major obstacle in our search for God. This conversation includes a statement and a question from Peter: "We have given up everything and followed you. What will there be for us?" (19:27). Peter affirms that the disciples have given up possessions to follow Jesus. Will there be a reward for their faithful discipleship? Jesus responds that there will be a reward, although perhaps not one they were expecting. That reward is to be given in the "new age" (19:28). God's reward for faithful discipleship may not be apparent in this world, but it will certainly be apparent in the next.

At this point in the Gospel, Jesus narrates the parable of the workers in the vineyard, whose context would have been quite familiar to Matthew's audience. At harvest time (September/October) the owner of a vineyard needed to hire extra laborers to ensure that the grapes would

be gathered before they rotted. Workers were normally hired at sunrise and worked all day. At sunset, they were paid their wages.

It would have been unusual for the landowner to return several times to the marketplace to search for more laborers, and no reason is given why some workers were not available at dawn. The first group of laborers immediately learned how much they would be paid (“the usual daily wage,” that is, one denarius). The latecomers only received the promise that “I will give you what is just” (20:4).

The parable provokes its listeners and readers (including us) when it reports that the landowner wants the laborers to be paid in reverse order “beginning with the last and ending with the first” (20:8). When the last to arrive received a full day’s pay, those who came early in the morning naturally expected more. We would probably feel the same way if we were in their shoes. Our sense of fairness demands that those who worked longer should receive more money. Our sense of justice seems violated and our expectations challenged when the latecomers are paid the same amount as those who worked all day in the heat of the sun.

The landowner, who challenges our expectations, has a different idea of what is fair. He chooses to be generous to those who did not show up early in the morning. His conclusion seems to indicate that the values of the Kingdom may not be the values of this world: “The last will be first, and the first will be last” (20:16). It doesn’t matter how long one has been a disciple or how hard one has worked to advance the cause of the Kingdom, for all Jesus’ disciples will be rewarded on the Last Day.

God loves to surprise us and to challenge us. How do we respond to an invitation that does not conform to our expectations? Perhaps we may be asked to give up something that we think we need or plans that we carefully worked out. When it comes to a vocation, Jesus often ignores our plans and timetables and challenges our expectations.

The parable demonstrates that our heavenly reward does not depend on how much we *do* for God, since no one can ever do enough. God provides, and we cooperate. Each of us is called to a specific vocation (priesthood, consecrated life, marriage, the single state) and to carry a specific cross. Like the rich young man, we can turn away from God’s invitation. Like the workers in the vineyard, we can complain that God is unfair. Or, like Matthew the Publican and the other apostles, we can trust in God’s grace to support us in the type of work that we are invited to undertake in the vineyard.



3. *Pray*

A Prayer of Gratitude for Brothers

*God of mercy and compassion,
thank you for the extraordinary life, witness, and ministry
of Religious Brothers in our Church.*

*In your wisdom, you have called these ordinary men
to generously serve, pray,
and share your healing love with others.*

*Deepen our appreciation for the vocation
of Religious Brothers.*

*Grant all Religious Brothers
the grace and perseverance they need
to proclaim your Holy Word
for the life of our Church and our world. Amen.*

(Adapted from the CMSM Brother's Day Prayer)

4. *Contemplate*

Imagine yourself working in a vineyard harvesting grapes – traditionally a time of feasting, singing, and dancing in ancient Israel. Be thankful for the privilege of working in God's vineyard.

5. *Act*

Surprise someone today with a phone call, a visit or a compliment.

Timothy Lenchak SVD
USC Bible Team