瀬田の丘

First published in 1973
Edited and published by the Public Relations Department of the Catholic Seta Parish Council 4-16-1 Seta, Setagaya-ku, Tokyo



Today's Word
The Twentyfifth Sunday, Year A (20 September)

Parish Priest: Father Hiroshi Konishi

First Reading: Isaiah 55:6－9
Second Reading: Letter to the Philippians 1:20c－24, 27a
Gospel Reading: Gospel of Matthew 20:1－16

From the Three Readings

The First Reading reveals the stark contrast between God's thoughts and human thoughts, and between God's ways and human ways. It is difficult for humans to understand God's intention to use even a pagan king to bring about liberation from exile. Therefore, in order to receive God's will, we must "return" to God's word. For human "schemes" to be transformed into "plans," we must know God's "will" and align ourselves with it.

In the second reading, Paul is torn between his "desire" to be with the Lord Jesus Christ and his "desire" to work for the mission. Ultimately, he chose to prioritize his mission.

Please pay attention to the phrase "standing there doing nothing" in the Gospel reading. It expresses the sorrow of those whose "connection" has been severed. The owner of the vineyard seeks to reestablish that "connection." The phrase "my friend" also springs from this same sentiment.

Let's take a closer look at today's Gospel reading.

Having set out for Jerusalem (see Chapter 19:1), Jesus teaches about the Kingdom of Heaven (Chapters 19:2－30). "There are some who, for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven, do not marry" (verse 12); "For the Kingdom of Heaven belongs to such as these" (verse 14); "In this way, you will store up treasure in heaven" (verse 21); "It is hard for a rich person to enter the Kingdom of Heaven" (verse 23)—and concluding this series of teachings on the "Kingdom of Heaven" is today's reading: the parable of the laborers in the vineyard.

In that case, isn't this parable intended to convey what the "Kingdom of Heaven" is like? We inevitably tend to focus on the master's generosity and interpret it as the tenderness of our Heavenly Father. While I don't think this is a mistaken understanding, I believe it is possible to deepen our understanding a bit further.

Verse 4 mentions “a just wage.” A literal translation would be “whatever is just.” For the worker hired at nine o’clock, it would be reasonable to think that a “just wage” is the amount remaining after deducting from the one denarius the time he began working late. That, after all, is “justice.”

On the other hand, let’s focus on the phrase “he did the same” in verse 5. If we take the person hired early in the morning for one denarius as the standard, it would seem natural to assume that the wages for those hired at noon and 3:00 p.m. would also be the amount remaining after deducting the time they did not work.

The phrase “did nothing” in verse 6 is a small detail, but it may be important. Why did the people hired at noon, 3:00 p.m., and 5:00 p.m. still go to the vineyard? Presumably, it was because it was better than standing in the marketplace “doing nothing all day.”

Wages are compensation for labor. However, God is not one who rewards people based on how they live or work. Instead, He bestows His grace unilaterally. In Jesus’ time, the region of Palestine was under Roman rule, and many cities had emerged, leading to the development of a monetary economy. People migrated to the cities in search of work. In contrast to the common social norm that wages are paid according to the time and amount of labor, isn’t Jesus trying to show that there is another set of values that cannot be fully captured by wages? “Why have you been standing here all day doing nothing?” (verse 6) may sound like a rebuke to those who do not work, but it also resonates as a word of “grace” to those who were not hired and are in danger of losing what is most important to them.