



St. Stephen's Traditional Episcopal Church

11856 Mays Chapel Rd., Timonium, MD 21093

Septuagesima, being Sunday, January 20th, 2008

**✠ In The Name of The Father and of The Son
and of The Holy Ghost. Amen. ✠**

Jesus' parables are rather like an onion in that you can peel the meanings off them in layers. The basic message of the parable of the laborers in the vineyard, today's Gospel reading, for instance, is that at the end of our earthly lives all Christians will get the same reward.

It doesn't matter whether we are apostles, who have given up everything to follow Jesus. It doesn't matter if we are martyrs who have laid down their lives for him. It doesn't matter if we are simply new converts with no remarkable achievements to our names. God will treat all of us equally.

This is not a message calculated to appeal the trade unionist that lies in the heart of all human beings. Deep down, all of us subscribe to the ideal of equal pay for equal work, unless, of course, we, ourselves, are among the richly-rewarded undeserving. But God's system does seem to be most unfair. Indeed, it seems quite incompatible with the assertion that God is perfectly just.

If we were to get our just deserts, St. Peter who gave up everything to follow Jesus and died crucified upside down in the Circus Maximus in Rome should be much more richly rewarded than me. I mean, if he were provided with a chauffeur-driven Rolls-Royce in heaven, I should get a Ford Falcon. The very idea that we would both end up driving Ford Falcons seems terribly unfair.

But that brings us to another message embedded in the parable and that is that both of us will be rewarded far beyond our wildest expectation. That penny – the word

the KJV translators use for the Roman silver Denarius. It was between three and five days pay for a Roman legionary – and legionaries, Roman citizens all, earned an awful lot more than a Jewish day laborer.

Most ordinary workers would rarely handle a Denarius. The most valuable coin day laborers workers could expect to receive would be the bronze Sestertius worth only a fourth of a Denarius, but mostly they'd be paid in Dupondius (an eighth of a Denarius) or even in copper coins called Asi.

Thus Jesus is explaining to us in the parable that none of us will be driving Ford Falcons. We will all be getting chauffeur-driven Rolls-Royces – if God decides to reward us with a new set of wheels, that is. This still isn't fair by human standards but, at least, folks like St. Peter will be comfortably off.

In order to get a glimpse of God's notions of justice towards human beings, we need to read on in the 20th chapter of St. Mathew's Gospel in the light of the one of the most important lessons in the Sermon on the Mount – source of the Beatitudes, another lesson appointed for today.

The 20th chapter of St. Matthew records that the mother of James and John begs Jesus to give her two sons the two top jobs in his government – a regime she and everybody else at the time expected to be an earthly one. Their fellow disciples, of course, were outraged at the notion.

But I'll wager none of them were any too please when Jesus explained how the pecking order in his kingdom works. "Ye know that the princes of the Gentiles exercise dominion over them, and they that are great exercise authority upon them. But it shall not be so among you: but whosoever will be great among you, let him be your servant; And whosoever will be chief among you, let him be your slave."

This policy is quite incompatible with human concepts of leadership. However, the Sermon on the Mount explains why God settled on this particular way of handling things. The Sermon is in large part a disquisition on God's standards of holiness in comparison with human standards.

In it, Jesus, explains that God is so far above us in his thoughts and actions, no matter how we behave we have no hope whatsoever of reaching his standards of perfection. It won't even help if we follow to the letter the laws God has laid down for us – the Jewish Law laid down in the Torah, the first five books of the Bible. It is, in fact, completely impossible for us to honor these laws to the letter, but even if we were able to do so we would still fall far short of God's standards of holiness.

(This, of course, explains why we need a Saviour so desperately: Jesus' sacrifice of himself upon the cross was essential because none of us come near the standards of perfection necessary as a sacrifice to atone for humanity's sins.)

As all of us are so far below God's standards, none of us in the church are good enough to boss our fellow Christians around. It's why the Church is not a democracy: None of us are sufficiently perfect to exercise a vote – not even bishops, priests or deacons; and most certainly not Church conventions. God is the only one who has a say.

There is also another message in this parable that we need to consider – one which reminds me of a story about a lady who prayed earnestly for years and years to win the state lottery. She didn't want the money for herself. She had plans for a lot of charitable works – feeding the poor and homeless, that sort of thing. But despite all her earnest prayers, she didn't win a thing. She would comb the newspaper every morning, but, sadly, her name never appeared among the lottery winners.

Finally, after 60 years of unceasing prayer, she got angry. "What's the matter with you, God?" she asked, "You let all these worthless greedy people win the lottery – not one of which has given a cent to charity. Don't you want me to feed the poor and homeless? Don't you want me to win the lottery?"

Suddenly, the room was filled with a mighty rushing wind and a still, small voice spoke from heaven. "Alice," it said, "If you want to win the lottery, you've got to buy a ticket."

All of the laborers who were given jobs in the vineyard had bought a ticket. All of them were looking for work. Even at the very end of the day, there were men still looking for a job. None of them had done what many people would have done in their circumstances – thrown in the towel and gone home.

In other words, before we can take advantage of the salvation God offers, we must be able to recognize that he offering it to us. And in order to do so, we need, in the first place, to liberate ourselves from the fashionable superstitions of our times.

In the First century A.D., it meant that people had to liberate themselves from the notion that life on earth was governed at the whim of a multiplicity of capricious gods. It meant accepting the fact that the one true God is good, that he loves and cares for us, and that each of us – male and female, bond and free – are equally precious in his sight.

In this day and age, it means we need to liberate ourselves from the conceit that it is somehow “scientific” to assume *a priori* that our infinitely complex, ordered and logical universe is the product of some miraculous cosmic accident. Then we need to accept the rather more logical conclusion that it is the work of an intelligence greater than our own.

A relationship with God is neither a one-way street, nor is it a passive affair. God has revealed to himself to mankind in the Books of the Old Testament and in the person of Jesus Christ. But in order to know him, we have to respond to him. We have to recognize he offering us a job before we can sign on to the payroll. *AMEN.*

To the Only Wise God, Our Saviour, be Glory and Majesty, Dominion and Power, Both Now and Forever. AMEN.