

My Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

Today God wants us to understand something about Him and about ourselves. He first speaks to us through the Prophet, “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways. As high as the heavens are above the earth, so high are my ways above your ways and my thoughts above your thoughts”. In practical terms Jesus makes real in today’s parable what God wants us to know about Him and about us.

To appreciate what the Lord is saying to us we have to put the parable in its proper context. It was a bright, sunny day that this rich young man came enthusiastically running up to Jesus and asked: “What must I do to be saved?” Jesus said, “Keep the Commandments!” The young man replied, “All of these I have observed. What do I still lack”. In his recounting of this encounter, the Evangelist Mark tells us “Jesus, looking at him, really loved him, and confirms the account of Matthew in the Lord’s response: “If you wish to be perfect, go, sell what you have and give it to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then, come, follow Me”. The Scriptures tell us that when the young man heard this, he walked away sad, for he was very rich. Jesus, apparently, was equally sad. Can’t you see him shaking his head in disappointment as he says to the disciples, “Amen, I say to you, it will be hard for one who is rich to enter the kingdom of heaven. Again, I say to you, it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for one who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.”

The disciples are astounded by this because then, even as it is now, wealth was seen as a blessing. It spoke of divine favor. Also, since they were a group of struggling fishermen, crooked tax collectors, and the like, they were probably thinking something like, “We could have used this kid especially because he was so rich”. So, my good friend, big mouth Peter speaks up and basically says, “Hey, we’ve left everything to follow you, what’s in it for us?” Jesus tells him that whatever they’ve given up to follow him “will receive a hundred times more, and will inherit eternal life”, but then he cryptically adds, “But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.”

In today’s parable, Jesus then explains what that means. When the rich landowner pays first those who came in the last hour a full-day’s wage, those who had labored in the field for a full twelve hours, through the heat of the day, expected they should have been paid at least twelve times more, and when they weren’t, they were angry, and complained about it, feeling cheated. But the landowner told them they were paid the agreed-upon wage and wasn’t unfair to them. Then, the Lord explains, “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.”

It really doesn't matter how many times we read this parable, in our human terms, it still feels really unfair. This is especially so if you know who these "last" are.

When I was in Philly, the farm labor buses would line up around the corner from my church, beginning around 4:00 in the morning. The foreman would get off the bus, walk along the line of those looking for day-work. He would walk down the line and simply point to those he wanted, picking out those who looked like they were in the best shape. When the buses were filled, they left for the New Jersey blueberry and tomato farms. If more workers were needed, the buses returned and the process was repeated. Eventually, those left standing on the corner, were the elderly, the crippled, the winos and the crackheads. These were the "last" of whom Jesus was speaking. It was of them that he said, "The last will be first, and the first will be last." Now, do you get a picture of how unfair this is to our poor human minds?

Perhaps we can gain a better perspective of God's way when we consider that Peter, the first of the Apostles, the rock upon whom Christ built his Church is really not revered as a saint any more than the young half-breed, poverty-stricken, Juan Diego, whom the Lord favored with a vision of His Mother at Guadalupe.

God's ways are not our ways, nor his thoughts, our thoughts.

Now, some on hearing this may ask the question, "Then, why bother?" Why try to live virtuous life? Why play by the rules? Why keep the commandments? If, in the end, the losers are going to receive the same reward, what's the point of it all?

The answer to these questions is given by the landowner in the parable, "Are you envious because I am generous?"

ENVY! One of the seven deadly sins. At its core, envy is a fundamental sadness at the good fortune of another. It's a weird kind of sin. If you lust you might enjoy a moment's pleasure. If you are greedy, you might enjoy the money as long as it lasts. But there's no joy in envy. An envious person looks sick and miserable and is full of spite. We even have an expression for it. We speak of being "green with envy".

We sing the song, "Amazing Grace" with great fervor. But, I suspect there are more than a few of us good, Church-going folks, if we were really honest about it, would suggest that grace is not amazing. It's really unfair. In fact, it is scandalous, for many hard to accept, hard to believe, even harder to receive. Grace shocks us by what it offers—the gratuitous, unmerited, undeserved, eternal love of God, manifested to us on the Cross of Calvary. It's painful for some of us to acknowledge that God's favorite song of all is the song of the redeemed; that the prayer, begging forgiveness, of the heinous serial murderer on death row approaching his execution, is received with great joy in the halls of heaven. Why is that thought so painful to many of us? ENVY!

Envy seeps into the hearts of even the best of us. That's why it is so deadly. We call it the green-eyed monster. How do we counter it?

For myself, it's been a matter of trying to always have an attitude of gratitude. That's why my first prayer response to everything is "Thank you, Jesus".

When I consider that heinous serial murderer or a terrorist or any other evil doer, I say, "Thank you, Jesus!" "Thank you, it's not me or someone I love or someone I know." "Thank you, Jesus!" So, were I to hear that he repented of his sins and was, in fact, saved, I could say, "Thank you, Jesus! "Thank you for saving him. Thank you, Jesus! Because if you saved him, you can save me too. Thank you, Jesus!"

One of the advantages of being alive at 73 is the perspective to look back and see how you might have done better. As I look back over my life, I think maybe I should have written fewer sermons and written more thank you notes. I would have liked to have offered more admiration and appreciation and less criticism. It would have been better to rejoice more readily at the success of others and be less cynical about the success of colleagues. If I had it to do over again, I think I would have lived a more grateful life.

Have you learned how to say thank you? Does it bubble up in your soul and roll joyfully from your lips? Do you leave every Mass saying, "Thank you, Jesus! You offered yourself yet again to save me and to save the whole world. Thank you, Jesus!"

Gratitude is an attitude we develop; a language we must learn; a life we live. President Kennedy once said, "We must never forget that the highest appreciation is not to utter words of gratitude but to live them."

In Thessalonians, St. Paul tells us to give thanks in all circumstances. In all things to give thanks. Not for all circumstances, but in all circumstances.

On Friday afternoon I got a call from our Music Director, Joanne Cardine, when she returned from the hospital after receiving gamma surgery to remove 20 cancerous lesions from her brain. She told me she was fine, that the surgery was successful, and all the lesions were removed. I told her I wanted to shout but I was afraid I would hurt her head. She said, "Go ahead, Shout!" And so I did. I shouted, "HALLELUIA! THANK YOU, JESUS! THANK YOU, JESUS, HALLELUIA!" Then, we laughed and laughed until we cried. And we cried tears of joy and then together shouted, "HALLELUIA! THANK YOU, JESUS! THANK YOU, JESUS!"

In all things we can give thanks. Never will I thank God for cancer. But I thank him for having power over cancer and giving poor, mortal men and women the power to defeat cancer. THANK YOU, JESUS!

So, my final question to you is this. Are you going to sell your soul to envy, or fill your life with gratitude? If you're intent on filling your life with gratitude in all circumstances, then shout it out, "HALLELUIA! HALLELUIA! THANK YOU, JESUS! THANK YOU, JESUS!"