

092108 25th Sunday in OT California Vineyards and God's Vineyard

My wife and I just returned from a combination family and business trip to California... we used to live in the Bay Area – so we often feel inclined – we need a ‘fix’ to visit the City by the Bay... to see our old haunts – the places in which we have many happy memories. While there, we visited our two sons – one in southern California.... The other in the East Bay near San Francisco.

As we drove through the mid-California valleys – I saw so many vineyards – reminding me of the beauty of the wine country north of San Francisco... I have always loved the pastoral feeling – the generational love and labor expressed by the families who raise grapes for wine.

To quote Dr. Scott Hahn – the great Protestant minister who became Catholic a decade or more ago, he says that the house of Israel is the vine of God. God planted it and watered it and prepared for the Israelites to bear fruits and good works. We know that Israel had an all-too-human relationship with God... they often failed to yield good works. Their failings – their sins brought about the fruits of evil – they were often overrun by conquerors. Yet in His continuing love for the chosen people, God promised that one day, He would replant His vineyard and the shoots would blossom to the ends of the earth.

That is the lead-in to the parable of salvation history in today's Gospel. God is the landowner.

And the workers hired at dawn are the Israelites to whom He offered a first covenant. Those hired later are the Gentiles – those who were not a part of the Jewish faith walk.... Yet in the Lord's generosity – the same wages paid to the Israelites are promised to the late hires...

Do you feel like so many who hear this reading and truly think it is unfair? Why would God do this? Let me share a story from right here in this parish ... then a story from California... stories from real life....

A couple weeks ago – a lady came to the office to see Fr. Tom... I was invited to sit in on the meeting. What unfolded was the story of a man named Bill – a person born and raised as a Baptist... a man now filled with cancer... his faith had lapsed years and years before. But now, in his final days – Bill had decided he wanted to become a Catholic. It's a much longer story that I can't get in to. Suffice it to say – that God's grace had been at work in this man's life... and in the circumstances in which he was living.

I went to visit Bill – spent time gaining information and praying with him. Two days later – Fr. Tom and I went and Bill was conditionally baptized into the Catholic faith... he received his First Communion... then Jim and Joan, our parish Care Ministers visited Bill, bringing Holy Communion and praying with him a few more times. Last week, while I was away – Bill died. His funeral is this Monday at 10 AM.

You might ask how fair is it of God to do such a thing?

How could it be that Bill is baptized and then dies into eternal life in a couple weeks? How is it that he is able to gain a reward from the landowner and we are still working in the vineyard? Perhaps some have been working for 30, 40, or 50 years or more!

Or are we truly working in the vineyard? Are we active Disciples of Christ? Do we have any right to grumble at the mercy and tenderness of God? Today's reading ought to caution us against the temptation to resent God's lavish mercy!

Now, here's a brief story from California. I had set up a meeting in Fresno with someone I'm involved with on the Internet. It happened that another person from a nearby town named Sanger wanted to drop in on our meeting in Fresno. This drop-in guest is a young mother of two – a stay at home mom who started an internet site for people trying to become Catholic... This young mother struggled because she didn't find the nearby Catholic Church to be as inviting and helpful as the woman and her husband tried to find out about what it takes to become a Catholic. She didn't have any problem finding people who told her about the procedures – the things you must do to become a Catholic. But she didn't find anyone who would literally wrap their arm around the young woman and say, "Yes, I know this is scary... I understand... I'll be here to help you." The mother also didn't find any neighbors or parishioners who were reaching out to her to help her.

I wonder if we might have such people sitting here today? Are there some among us who want to become Catholic – yet there aren't people offering to be sponsors? If not a sponsor – a sharing friend? Are there some among us who once were Catholic and are now looking at trying to get back into their faith? Let us not sit and say I don't know what to do... pray and ask God to show the way.

You and I need to keep laboring in the vineyard... and if we have been slackers in any way – let us respond to the ever-present grace God presents to us... as Paul says in today's Epistle... let us conduct ourselves worthily, struggling to bring all men and women to the praise of His name.

May God lead us along the straight and narrow path – let us not wander aimlessly in the desert as the Israelites did. We know what we are called to do – or at least we should be prayerful and asking God... waiting for Him to speak to us... Speak Lord, your servant is listening...