

Commentary on the Gospel for Wed, Aug 21st 2013

Today's readings begin with a puzzling parable in the book of Judges, which can be clarified with a little history.

Recall that an angel had anointed Gideon to deliver Israel from their enemies. Judges 6:12. Following his military victories, Gideon refused the people's entreaties to become their ruler, saying "I will not rule over you, nor shall my son rule over you. The Lord must rule over you." Judges 8:24. Gideon had seventy sons, two of whom were Abimelech and Jotham.

Following Gideon's death, Abimelech incited the people to choose him to rule over them instead of allowing all Gideon's sons to share this putative authority. Abimelech reinforced his power by killing all of his brothers except Jotham, who somehow escaped this grisly fate. Confirming his bad character, Abimelech also used silver from the temple of Baal to hire "shiftless men and ruffians as his followers." Judges 9:4. This sets the stage for the parable, which Jotham uses to remind the people of his father's virtue and generosity toward them (in the form of productive trees choosing to provide valuable goods instead of ruling) and to prophesy the ignoble outcome of choosing Abimelech (the comparatively worthless buckthorn tree).

Government is a perplexing problem for humanity. Protecting human dignity and freedom while also keeping order needed for human thriving has proven to be a difficult bargain. In earlier times when conquest by an enemy usually meant death and enslavement, the people's desire for protection and security from a strong leader is perhaps easier to comprehend. But this always comes at a cost – government always enacts a toll charge. (See, e.g., 1 Samuel 9:10-18 for a summary that resonates with modern people, too.) Government through a bad apple like Abimelech leads to much sorrow, indeed.

Today's psalm reflects upon the blessing of a good king. Though the psalmist may have been looking backwards to the examples of leaders like Gideon through whom God brought deliverance to Israel, we can now see the richer sense of fulfillment through our Lord. Jesus Christ is the king who has become a blessing forever, delivering us from our ultimate enemy, death. His rule is one of humility and generosity toward us, and we see this in the description of the Kingdom of heaven in today's gospel.

In Matthew's gospel, this king is the landowner seeking laborers for his vineyard. Notice that the landowner is actively seeking workers. He persistently goes to the market at dawn, then at nine, noon, three, and five o'clock. He must care a great deal about the vineyard; the work must be important to

justify those recruiting efforts! All of the workers got what they bargained for – and some got more. Perhaps the landowner was joyful over the harvest and he chose to share it – it's his to share, after all. This troubled the earlier laborers because they had envy in their hearts – they did not respect his prerogative for generosity and demanded more for themselves.

It is easy to fall into this trap of envy. Envy of his brothers seems to have led Abimelech to murder them. Envy of other lands led Israel to want a king and eventually other gods instead of the Lord. And envy can even prevent us from the simple satisfaction of enjoying the reward from our own honest work. Envy produces nothing valuable; a desire to take from others makes us poorer. Let us ask the Lord to renew our souls by delivering us from envy and by opening our eyes and hearts to gratitude and generosity. And let us be His imitators, too, in persistence for seeking fellow laborers in the vineyard.

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