

St. Thomas Aquinas for Septuagesima Sunday  
Catena Aurea (Golden Chain),  
Gospel of Matthew 20:1-16

(John Henry Parker, v. I, J.G.F. and J. Rivington:London, 1842)

*The kingdom of heaven is like to an householder, who went out early in the morning to hire labourers into his vineyard. And having agreed with the labourers for a penny a day, he sent them into his vineyard. And going about the third hour, he saw others standing in the market place idle. And he said to them: Go you also into my vineyard, and I will give you what shall be just. And they went their way. And again he went out about the sixth and the ninth hour, and did in like manner. But about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing, and he saith to them: Why stand you here all the day idle? They say to him: Because no man hath hired us. He saith to them: Go you also into my vineyard. And when evening was come, the lord of the vineyard saith to his steward: Call the labourers and pay them their hire, beginning from the last even to the first. When therefore they were come, that came about the eleventh hour, they received every man a penny. But when the first also came, they thought that they should receive more: and they also received every man a penny. And receiving it they murmured against the master of the house, Saying: These last have worked but one hour, and thou hast made them equal to us, that have borne the burden of the day and the heats. But he answering said to one of them: Friend, I do thee no wrong: didst thou not agree with me for a penny? Take what is thine, and go thy way: I will also give to this last even as to thee. Or, is it not lawful for me to do what I will? is thy eye evil, because I am good? So shall the last be first, and the first last. For many are called, but few chosen.*

Remig.: To establish the truth of this saying, “There are many first that shall be last, and last first,” the Lord subjoins a similitude.

Pseudo-Chrys.: The Master of the household is Christ, whose house are the heavens and the earth; and the creatures of the heavens, and the earth, and beneath the earth, His family. His vineyard is righteousness, in which are set divers sorts of righteousness as vines, as meekness, chastity, patience, and the other virtues; all of which are called by one common name righteousness. Men are the cultivators of this vineyard, whence it is said, “Who went out early in the morning to hire labourers into his vineyard.” For God placed His righteousness in our senses, not for His own but for our benefit. Know then that we are the hired labourers. But as no man gives wages to a labourer, to the end he should do nothing save only to eat, so likewise we were not thereto called by Christ, that we should labour such things only as pertain to our own good, but to the glory of God. And like as the hired labourer looks first to his task, and after to his daily food, so ought we to mind first those things which concern the glory of God, then those which concern our own profit. Also as the hired labourer occupies the whole day in his Lord's work, and takes but a single hour for his own meal; so ought we to occupy our whole life in the glory of God, taking but a very small portion of it for the uses of this world. And as the hired labourer when he has done no work is ashamed that day to enter the house, and ask his food, how should not you

be ashamed to enter the church, and stand before the face of God, when you have done nothing good in the sight of God?

Greg., Hom. in Ev., xix, 1: Or; The Master of the household, that is, our Maker, has a vineyard, that is, the Church universal, which has borne so many stocks, as many saints as it has put forth from righteous Abel to the very last saint who shall be born in the end of the world. To instruct this His people as for the dressing of a vineyard, the Lord has never ceased to send out His labourers; first by the Patriarchs, next by the teachers of the Law, then by the Prophets, and at the last by the Apostles, He has toiled in the cultivation of His vineyard; though every man, in whatsoever measure or degree he has joined good action with right faith, has been a labourer in the vineyard.

Origen: For the whole of this present life may be called one day, long to us, short compared to the existence of God.

Greg.: The morning is that age of the world which was from Adam and Noah, and therefore it is said, "Who went out early in the morning to hire labourers into his vineyard." The terms of their hiring He adds, "And when he had agreed with the labourers for a denarius a day."

Origen: The denarius I suppose here to mean salvation.

Remig.: A denarius was a coin anciently equal to ten sesterces, and bearing the king's image. Well therefore does the denarius represent the reward of the keeping of the decalogue. And that, "Having agreed with them for a denarius a day," is well said, to shew that every man labours in the field of the holy Church in hope of the future reward.

Greg.: The third hour is the period from Noah to Abraham; of which it is said, "And he went out about the third hour, and saw others standing in the market-place idle."

Origen: The market-place is all that is without the vineyard, that is, without the Church of Christ.

Pseudo-Chrys.: For in this world men live by buying and selling, and gain their support by defrauding each other.

Greg.: He that lives to himself, and feeds on the delights of the flesh, is rightly accused as idle, forasmuch as he does not seek the fruit of godly labour.

Pseudo-Chrys.: Or; The "idle" are not sinners, for they are called dead. But he is idle who works not the work of God. Do you desire to be not idle? Take not that which is another's; and give of that which is your own, and you have laboured in the Lord's vineyard, cultivating the vine of mercy. It follows, "And he said unto them, Go ye also into my vineyard." Observe that it is with the first alone that He agrees upon the sum to be given, a denarius; the others are hired on no express stipulation, but "What is right I will give you." For the Lord knowing that Adam would fall, and that all should hereafter perish in the deluge, made conditions for him, that he should never say that he therefore neglected righteousness, because he knew not what reward he should have. But with the rest He made no contract, seeing He was prepared to give more than the labourers could hope.

Origen: Or; He did not call upon the labourers of the third hour for a complete task, but left to their own choice, how much they should work. For they might perform in the

vineyard work equal to that of those who had wrought since the morning, if they chose to put forth upon their task an operative energy, such as had not yet been exerted.

Greg.: The sixth hour is that from Abraham to Moses, the ninth that from Moses to the coming of the Lord.

Pseudo-Chrys.: These two hours are coupled together, because in the sixth and ninth it was that He called the generation of the Jews, and multiplied to publish His testaments among men, whereas the appointed time of salvation now drew nigh.

Greg.: The eleventh hour is that from the coming of the Lord to the end of the world. The labourer in the morning, at the third, sixth, and ninth hours, denotes the ancient Hebrew people, which in its elect from the very beginning of the world, while it zealously and with right faith served the Lord, ceased not to labour in the husbandry of the vineyard. But at the eleventh the Gentiles are called. For they who through so many ages of the world had neglected to labour for their living, were they who had stood the whole day idle. But consider their answer; "They say unto him, Because no man hath hired us;" for neither Patriarch nor Prophet had come to them. And what is it to say, "No man hath hired us," but to say, None has preached to us the way of life.

Pseudo-Chrys.: For what is our hiring, and the wages of that hiring? The promise of eternal life; for the Gentiles knew neither God, nor God's promises.

Hilary: These then are sent into the vineyard, "Go ye also into my vineyard."

Raban.: But when they had rendered their day's task, at the fitting time for payment, "When even was come," that is, when the day of this world was drawing to its close.

Pseudo-Chrys.: Consider, He gives the reward not the next morning, but in the evening. Thus the judgment shall take place while this world is still standing, and each man shall receive that which is due to him. This is on two accounts. First, because the happiness of the world to come is to be itself the reward of righteousness; so the award is made before, and not in that world. Secondly, that sinners may not behold the blessedness of that day, "The Lord saith unto his steward," that is, the Son to the Holy Spirit.

Gloss., non. occ., sed vid.

Raban.: Or, if you choose, the Father saith unto the Son; for the Father wrought by the Son, and the Son by the Holy Spirit, not that there is any difference of substance, or majesty.

Origen: Or; "The Lord said to his steward," that is, to one of the Angels who was set over the payment of the labourers; or to one of those many guardians, according to what is written, that "The heir as long as he is a child is under tutors and governors." [Gal 4:2]

Remig.: Or, the Lord Jesus Christ Himself is the master of the household, and also the steward, like as He is the door, and also the keeper of the door. For He Himself will come to judgment, to render to each man according to that he has done. He therefore calls His labourers, and renders to them their wages, so that when they shall be gathered together in the judgment, each man shall receive according to his works.

Origen, Heb 11, 40: But the first labourers having the witness through faith have not received the promise of God, the lord of the household providing some better thing for us, that they without us should not be made perfect. And because we have obtained mercy,

we hope to receive the reward first, we, that is, who are Christ's, and after us they that wrought before us; wherefore it is said, "Call the labourers, and give them their hire, beginning from the last unto the first."

Pseudo-Chrys.: For we always give more willingly, where we give without return, seeing it is for our own honour that we give. Therefore God in giving reward to all the saints shews himself just; in giving to us, merciful; as the Apostle speaks, "That the Gentiles might glorify God for His mercy;" [Rom 16:9] and thence it is said, "Beginning from the last even unto the first." Or surely that God may shew His inestimable mercy, He first rewards the last and more unworthy, and afterwards the first; for of His great mercy He regarded not order of merit.

Aug., de Spir. et Lit. 24: Or; The lesser are therefore taken as first, because the lesser are to be made rich.

Greg.: They get alike a denarius who have wrought since the eleventh hour, (for they sought it with their whole soul,) and who have wrought since the first. They, that is, who were called from the beginning of the world have alike received the reward of eternal happiness, with those who come to the Lord in the end of the world.

Pseudo-Chrys.: And this not with injustice. For he who was born in the first period of the world, lived no longer than the determined time of his life, and what harm was it to him, though the world continued after his leaving it? And they that shall be born towards its close will not live less than the days that are numbered to them. And how does it cut their labour shorter, that the world is speedily ended, when they have accomplished their thread of life before? Moreover it is not of man to be born sooner or later, but of the power of God. Therefore he that is born first cannot claim to himself a higher place, nor ought he to be held in contempt that was born later. "And when they had received it, they murmured against the goodman of the house, saying." But if this we have said be true, that both first and last have lived their own time, and neither more nor less; and that each man's death is his consummation, what means this that they say, "We have borne the burden and heat of the day?" Because to know that the end of the world is at hand is of great force to make us do righteousness. Wherefore Christ in His love to us said, "The kingdom of heaven shall draw nigh." [Matt 4:2] Whereas it was a weakening of them to know that the duration of the world was to be yet long. So that though they did not indeed live through the whole of time, they seem in a manner to have borne its weight. Or, by the burden of the day is meant the burdensome precepts of the Law; and the heat may be that consuming temptation to error which evil spirits contrived for them, stirring them to imitate the Gentiles; from all which things the Gentiles were exempt, believing on Christ, and by compendiousness of grace being saved completely.

Greg.: Or; To bear the burden and heat of the day, is to be weaned through a life of long duration with the heats of the flesh. But it may be asked, How can they be said to murmur, when they are called to the kingdom of heaven? For none who murmurs shall receive the kingdom, and none who receives that can murmur.

Chrys.: But we ought not to pursue through every particular the circumstances of a parable; but enter into its general scope, and seek nothing further. This then is not

introduced in order to represent some as moved with envy, but to exhibit the honour that shall be given us as so great as that it might stir the jealousy of others.

Greg.: Or because the old fathers down to the Lord's coming, notwithstanding their righteous lives, were not brought to the kingdom, this murmur is theirs. But we who have come at the eleventh hour, do not murmur after our labours, forasmuch as having come into this world after the coming of the Mediator, we are brought to the kingdom as soon as ever we depart out of the body.

Jerome: Or, all that were called of old envy the Gentiles, and are pained at the grace of the Gospel.

Hilary: And this murmur of the labourers corresponds with the frowardness of this nation, which even in the time of Moses were stiff-necked.

Remig.: By this one to whom his answer is given, may be understood all the believing Jews, whom he calls friends because of their faith.

Pseudo-Chrys.: Their complaint was not that they were defrauded of their rightful recompense, but that the others had received more than they deserved. For the envious have as much pain at others' success as at their own loss. From which it is clear, that envy flows from vain glory. A man is grieved to be second, because he wishes to be first. He removes this feeling of envy by saying, "Didst thou not agree with me for a denarius?"

Jerome: A denarius bears the figure of the king. You have therefore received the reward which I promised you, that is, my image and likeness; what desirest thou more? And yet, it is not that thou shouldest have more, but that another should have less that thou seekest. "Take that is thine, and go thy way."

Remig.: That is, take thy reward, and enter into glory. "I will give to this last," that is, to the gentile people, according to their deserts, as to thee.

Origen: Perhaps it is to Adam He says, "Friend, I do thee no wrong; didst thou not agree with me for a denarius? Take that thine is, and go thy way." Salvation is thine, that is, the denarius. "I will give unto this last also as unto thee." A person might not improbably suppose, that this last was the Apostle Paul, who wrought but one hour, and was made equal with all who had been before him.

Aug., de Sanc. Virg., 26: Because that life eternal shall be equal to all the saints, a denarius is given to all; but forasmuch as in that life eternal the light of merits shall shine diversely, there are with the Father many mansions; so that under this same denarius bestowed unequally one shall not live longer than another, but in the many mansions one shall shine with more splendour than another.

Greg.: And because the attainment of this kingdom is of the goodness of His will, it is added, "It is not lawful for me to do what I will with mine own?" For it is a foolish complaint of man to murmur against the goodness of God. For complaint is not when a man gives not what he is not bound to give, but if he gives not what he is bound to give; whence it is added, "Is thine eye evil because I am good?"

Remig.: By the eye is understood his purpose. The Jews had an evil eye, that is, an evil purpose, seeing they were grieved at the salvation of the Gentiles. Whereto this parable

pointed, He shews by adding, "So the first shall be last, and the last first;" and so the Jews of the head are become the tail, and we of the tail are become the head.

Pseudo-Chrys.: Or; He says the first shall be last, and the last first, not that the last are to be exalted before the first, but that they should be put on an equality, so that the difference of time should make no difference in their station. That He says, "For many are called, but few chosen," is not to be taken of the elder saints, but of the Gentiles; for of the Gentiles who were called being many, but few were chosen.

Greg.: There be very many come to the faith, yet but few arrive at the heavenly kingdom; many follow God in words, but shun Him in their lives. Whereof spring two things to be thought upon. The first, that none should presume ought concerning himself; for though he be called to the faith, he knows not whether he shall be chosen to the kingdom.

Secondly, that none should despair of his neighbour, even though he see him lying in vices; because he knows not the riches of the Divine mercy. Or otherwise. The morning is our childhood; the third hour may be understood as our youth, the sun as it were mounting to his height is the advance of the heat of age; the sixth hour is manhood, when the sun is steady in his meridian height, representing as it were the maturity of strength; by the ninth is understood old age, in which the sun descends from his vertical height, as our age falls away from the fervour of youth; the eleventh hour is that age which is called decrepit, and dotting.

Chrys.: That He called not all of them at once, but some in the morning, some at the third hour, and so forth, proceeded from the difference of their minds [ed. note: ]. He then called them when they would obey; as He also called the thief when he would obey.

Whereas they say, "Because no man hath hired us," we ought not to force a sense out of every particular in a parable. Further, it is the labourers and not the Lord who speak thus; for that He, as far as it pertains to Him, calls all men from their earliest years, is shewn in this, "He went out early in the morning to hire labourers."

Greg.: They then who have neglected till extreme old age to live unto God, have stood idle to the eleventh hour, yet even these the master of the household calls, and oftentimes gives them their reward before other, inasmuch as they depart out of the body into the kingdom before those that seemed to be called in their childhood.

Origen: But this, "Why stand ye here all the day idle?" is not said to such as having "begun, in the spirit," [Gal 3:3] have been "made perfect by the flesh," as inviting them to return again, and to live in the Spirit. This we speak not to dissuade prodigal sons, who have consumed their substance of evangelic doctrine in riotous living, from returning to their father's house; but because they are not like those who sinned in their youth, before they had learnt the things of the faith.

Chrys.: When He says, "The first shall be last, and the last first," He alludes secretly to such as were at the first eminent, and afterwards set at nought virtue; and to others who have been reclaimed from wickedness, and have surpassed many. So that this parable was made to quicken the zeal of those who are converted in extreme old age, that they should not suppose that they shall have less than others.

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