

September 21, 2008 – 25th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Prepared by Kathy Dahl-Bredine, Maryknoll Lay Missioner, Oaxaca, Mexico

- Isaiah 55: 6-9 As high as the heavens are above the earth, so high are my ways above your ways and my thoughts above your thoughts.
- Psalms 145: 2-3, 8-9, 17-18 You open wide your hand and satisfy the desire of every living thing.
- Philippians 1: 20-24, 27 With all boldness, now as always, Christ will be magnified in my body
- Matthew 20: 1-16 The owner's conduct involves no violation of justice; that all the workers receive the same wage is due only to his generosity to the latest arrivals; the resentment of the first comes from envy.

How high are my thoughts above your thoughts! So says the Creator in Isaiah. Indeed, not just in terms of the vastness of the Creative process that God has conceived are God's thoughts different than ours. The parable of the workers in the field is Jesus' way of showing us that in very practical matters such as the field work of those in this paradoxical parable, God's thoughts are not like ours.

Why should those who come to work in the late afternoon receive the same pay as those who came early in the morning? What is Jesus saying to us about God, the Ultimate Owner of the vineyard?

Even before it is totally light, as the sun begins to come over the mountaintop of our village of San Isidro Tilantongo in Oaxaca, Mexico, we hear the sounds of the hooves of Hermelinda's donkeys on the trail behind our house. Hermelinda climbs behind the donkeys half-way up the ridge and then follows them on the familiar path that leads to the Loma Larga, the long hilltop where she will harvest corn for fodder today. Hermelinda is a single mother, but she will probably not work alone in the hot sun all day. Her mother will probably come out to help when she finishes her chores. And if there is too much work, she can appeal to a village custom called *geza*. *Geza* is an ancient Mixtec form of work sharing that evens the economic differences among villagers. If I help Hermelinda with her harvesting as a *geza*, she will then be obliged to help me when I have a need, all without the exchange of money.

Indeed, according to the Mixtec indigenous world-view, we live on a planet of limited goods and resources. And if some take too much for themselves, they believe, some will be left without the resources essential to sustain them. To avoid this dangerous kind of over-accumulation, through the millennia the Mixtec people have developed clear social arrangements to redistribute resources within the community. *Geza* is just one such mechanism. *Tequio*, or common, unpaid community work projects, such as repairing the rough road that passes by Loma Larga, is another such arrangement. So are the unpaid *cargos*, or government positions often awarded to those who have done well enough that they can survive three years largely away from their fields serving in community leadership. Then there are the *mayordomías* through which those who have done well share back with the community in times of fiesta. This past Easter, the *mayordomos* for Holy Week opened their homes from Holy Thursday through Easter Sunday and committed to giving free food and drink to all who might come.

With these customs perhaps our villagers are saying something like what Jesus wants to communicate with the parable of the workers in the vineyard. The Creator, out of generosity, has made the vineyard of this planet for the use of all. All of us, from Hermelinda, to the migrants that cross our borders, to the workers in our factories and farms, have a right to share in this bounty. And it is up to us, as hearers of Jesus' parable, to figure out how this can happen.

As Jared Diamond, author of the recent book *Collapse*, points out, this is a challenging task for those of us in the global North. If we were to develop a consumption scale of per capita resource use and waste production, most of the world's population would have a consumption factor of one. In the United States, however, we would have a consumption factor of 32. If we were to universalize our consumption rates to the whole world tomorrow, it would have the impact of a population of 73 billion people on the planet. We have become the unsustainable part of the human family.

Of course, it is no wonder that the human population tends to try to cross this consumption gap, and that the "ones" are migrating North to try to join the "32s." But clearly the Ultimate Owner of the vineyard had something else in mind. Could it be a change in economic and trade policies that are increasing the wealth and consumption gaps between those who have and those who do not? Could it be a lifestyle choice that needs to be changed from one that values consumption and comfort over a sense for the common good, such as is present in Mixtec societies? Have we lost respect for the earth that the Mixtecs call "Mother," and can we learn to treat the living organism which is this planet with the care and the thankfulness that such a gift from the great Vineyard Owner would merit?

The message of Jesus becomes clear. All, without distinction, have a right to the goods of Vineyard Earth. How can we make that happen?

For more information

Read more about how farmers in Oaxaca are changing their farming and marketing methods so that they can still make a living off their farming in the face of dwindling social services, skyrocketing food prices and steep competition created by the North American Free Trade Agreement in "Loving our neighbor in a shrinking world." This resource, developed by Maryknoll missionaries, encourages voters in the 2008 U.S. elections to scrutinize candidates' policy proposals through the lens of those who both in the U.S. and overseas lack basic necessities, endure the scourge of racism, live with gender-based discrimination or feel the immediate impact of climate change. Lower consumption levels are needed to bring society back into harmony with all of creation. Just and realistic government policy will be required to set the direction. "Loving our neighbor in a shrinking world" recommends important policy goals as a way forward.

Email for a copy, or find the election guide here:
www.maryknollogc.org/2008elections/index.htm

Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns: *Peace, Social Justice & Integrity of Creation*

P.O. Box 29132 Washington, D.C. **20017**

phone: (202)832-1780 fax: (202)832-5195

ogc@maryknoll.org

www.maryknollogc.org