

Homily for the Red Mass
Diocese of Toledo
20 September 2026

Your Excellency Bishop Thomas, Your Honors, members of Bar Association, officers of the court, friends, brothers and sisters, greetings in the name of the Lord Jesus.

I am honored to be celebrate this Red Mass with you today, in which we invoke the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon all who play a role in the administration of justice in the Diocese of Toledo. The celebration of a Red Mass traditionally takes place at this time of the year, around the start of the new judicial session, so that the gift of the Holy Spirit may aid all who take part in the work of justice, a work which ultimately is the fruit not only of human effort but also of divine grace.

The prayers and vestments today are taken from the Votive Mass of the Holy Spirit rather than from the 25th Sunday in Ordinary Time. It is the color of the vestments – red for the Holy Spirit – that gives this Mass its name. The readings, however, remain the regular Sunday readings for today.

I often like to point out that on every Sunday and Holy Day of obligation, the Church intentionally pairs the first reading with the Gospel. The second reading may or may not relate to the other two, but the first reading and the Gospel are always connected. It is often helpful to explore the nature of that connection, and to uncover why the Church has paired these readings. Today is no exception.

In today's Gospel, we hear the parable about the owner of a vineyard and the workers who labor there. It seems to focus on the workers' grievance regarding unfair treatment and the apparent refusal to give them what is owed.

According to the classical definition of justice – to render to each what is his or her due – the workers in the vineyard who were hired at the beginning of the day seem to have a legitimate complaint ... they worked harder and longer than the others, and so they should be compensated more generously.

But we need to consider that first reading from Isaiah. Isaiah reminds us that God's thoughts are not our thoughts, and his ways are not our ways. The pairing of this reading from Isaiah with the Gospel suggests that there is more going on in this parable than we might realize at the start.

The whole understanding of this parable as a question of how fairly or unfairly the workers were paid is predicated upon the belief that the workers who worked all day have actually earned what they received. But what if that's not true?

What if the last workers to be hired at 5:00 p.m., when paid, did not receive the usual daily wage, but instead received 100 days' wages? What if the first workers to be hired in the morning also received 100 days' wages?

Could any of them claim to have earned what they were given? Could any of them claim to have a right to more than what they were paid?

What if they expected to receive what they had earned, but in fact, they received far more?

God's thoughts are not our thoughts, and his ways are not our ways.

As with all parables, this parable is much more about God and much less about us. It is more about the generosity of the owner of the vineyard, and less about the justice of how much each receives.

The reality is that we are the workers in the vineyard, and the gift we have received from the owner is redemption, the forgiveness of our sins and the promise of eternal life, purchased for us by the Blood of Christ.

None of us has earned salvation. We can't even claim responsibility for the fact that we exist, much less for the fact that we have been forgiven and redeemed and loved by a God who emptied himself for love of us.

The gift we have all received is beyond price, given out of the generosity of God, whose own justice is tempered by mercy, and whose judgment is tempered by love.

And so, we return to that first reading. Isaiah tells us that God's thoughts are not our thoughts, nor are his ways our ways. If his justice is beyond ours, does that leave us helpless to attain true justice? Should we just give up? Not at all.

Rather, we should understand that our own sense of what is good and just is an echo of a goodness and a justice that are well beyond this world. Our own work in the service of justice is a sacred work, a participation, however imperfect, in the divine work of justice. As best as we are able, we strive to reflect in our work the justice and, yes, the compassion of the One from whom all justice flows.

And so, brothers and sisters of the judicial and legal establishment, the great Judeo-Christian tradition of justice, grounded in the rule of law, has been entrusted to you, and you are its custodians. Your own personal efforts contributing to a just and ordered society can and should be strengthened by the work of grace.

Isaiah tells us this morning to seek the Lord while he may be found, and to call to him while he is near. Take his advice to heart. In your work of justice, keep your eyes fixed on Jesus. Seek him while he may be found; call to him while he is near.

Look not only to what is just and good and true, but seek Justice itself, Goodness itself, Truth itself. And even beyond this, seek the One who is their source, and know that the Justice, Goodness, and Truth which you seek has a name, and that name is Jesus.

We gather here today to ask that the Lord give you a share in his own spirit of wisdom and prudence, to strengthen you and guide you as you participate in his own ministry of justice.

Christ himself has called you to this ministry, and he will uphold you in the fulfillment of your sacred duty.

May you find the One whom you seek, the One who calls you, the One who is the source of Justice, Goodness, and Truth, in whom all Justice, Goodness, and Truth are found, and know that he has a name, and his name is Jesus.