25 (A) 2017, Mt 20:1-16:
Augustinian Sisters, 60th in Australia and
Declaration of Mother Teresa Spinelli, foundress, as Venerable (2016)

"A parable is like the wick of a candle; it costs little, yet, dim as its light may be, it can make you discover a treasure." Such was a rabbinical saying in the time of Jesus, which clearly he took to heart, so that the parable became one of his most effective ways of communicating. It takes examples from everyday life and provides a key to reading reality without forcing or obliging, leaving intact the freedom of the listener.

So what do we hear? "Why be envious because I am generous?" Many times in the Bible God is defined as generous, boundless in creative love and relentless in redemptive compassion. But if we are honest we would have to admit that often we only hear this with one ear, only read it with one eye. Strange as it may seem in our sinful condition we do not really want God to be so generous, so abounding in love; it offends our sense of order and justice. We can identify more with Jonah, quite upset when the people of Nineveh actually repented. Instead he wanted to see God burn them up and so he complains, "I knew you were a tender, compassionate God, slow to anger, rich in faithful love, who relents from punishing!" Or as Isaiah hears God saying today, "Your thoughts are not my thoughts ... as the heavens are high above the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways."

This is a prophetic word of promise and peace, encouragement and affection, but I suspect we rather hear it as a word of reproof and condemnation. The reading promises that God will freely forgive, that there is a universal, compassionate welcome to those who abandon evil and return to God, that we can hope for more than what our own hearts would give us.

All of this appears in the gospel parable – difficult. Indeed, if we're honest, I suspect most of us think it's basically unfair. For the original audience in front of Jesus the thought must have come of the workers in the vineyard as themselves, Jews, persecuted for centuries in observance of the Law, now confronted with the claim that Gentiles, non-Jews, were welcome into God's covenant of salvation on much easier terms. The parable also suggests many situations in which we ourselves are involved - where our thoughts are not God's thoughts - we may well be willing to help the unfortunate, but putting them on equal terms with ourselves and favouring schemes to help them achieve this? Well, that's another matter! Or how in Australia we think about the poorer countries of the world. Our success, our higher standard of living, our good fortune in natural resources are taken for granted, as though we see ourselves to be more worthy because of our success; that it is right we are rich and their fault they are poor and often starving. But because we believe and seek to follow God's will, it shouldn't lead us to an attitude that dictates to God how mercy and generosity should be shown. The line between following God's will and deciding what God wills is always thin and fragile.

At times we read the lives of saints and their virtue just seems beyond us; there they are on the mountain tops and here are we in the foothills. When you come to know the life of the now Venerable Teresa Spinelli, founder of the Augustinian Sisters Servants of Jesus and Mary, you find there's room for us all. In the midst of human and spiritual difficulties she lived a truly holy life; a wife, a mother, a Religious who

led a life of suffering, but of complete faith in God. She knew what we talk of today, domestic violence. She knew the pain of separation and in later years the mental illness of her only child, Maria Domenica. At the heart of all this was God's call, to Frosinone and not Ferentino, to educate girls when this was not done, and to do so for the poor. "Love, and do what you will" wrote St Augustine, and so did Sister Teresa. Joining her self-giving, to that of Christ on the cross, brought a depth to her life to which she was always faithful, for God lay at the heart of it. She abandoned herself and her work into God's hands, sure that divine providence would always be there to guide and protect.

To live this kind of life you have to return to its source a thousand times over, to follow with eyes directed towards the realities of faith rather than towards things more immediately accessible. This is an expectant gaze, but one free from pre-conceptions. This is a welcoming gaze for what is and always will be beyond, for the mystery within the infinitely near. This is a loving gaze which chooses, which desires to love. There is a purification in all this, a passage, a passover, a journey to the One who calls us to follow. It summons from us trust in his love, and the desire to return that love. It entails an exchange of friendship. Here our choice is called to respond to his, person to person, heart to heart. It is not surprising that the Decree of the Congregation for the Causes of Saints declaring the Servant of God Maria Teresa Spinelli Venerable begins with the picture of Abraham setting out to follow God's call. It placed her often on her knees in front of the tabernacle.

Such a life calls for patience and perseverance in the situation in which God has placed us. It accepts what exists and is real, what is willed by God and included within the design of his providence. This includes the persons God puts at our side, the place, time, health and sickness, the play of events, all that moulds and forms us, oppresses us or lifts us up, makes us rebellious or sanctifies us. The essential thing is to recognise the will of God there, not shutting ourselves up within the frail confines of our own wisdom, but letting ourselves be moulded. This is easy to say, but hard to live. Patience and perseverance are the fruit of great force and great faith. It's not resignation, but the deliberate embracing of a dearly loved will. To live this life is an act of love all the purer because it only has one thing to say, like Mary, "fiat", "thy will be done." It calls us to see this same love, this same will, in all the circumstances, pleasant or unpleasant, that surround our life. Read the life story of the Venerable Teresa and you'll see this is just what she did.

The five Sisters who came to Australia sixty years ago, and those who continue their mission today, live by that charism. It has had the mark of gospel generosity right from the start, arriving on 25th February 1957 and just a few weeks later on the 12th March opening their school. It was not easy and the sisters at headquarters in Malta thought that Australia was "too hard" and that they should come back. But Sr Evodia's reply was "no", and so they stayed because their mission was here. These sixty years of service in Australia witness to a real commitment. So today we especially welcome Sr Tessie Bezzina, the Mother General; your presence graces us. The sisters came for migrants from Italy and Malta, but they went where they were called – to Broken Hill from 1964 to 1969, Frankston from 1972 to 1980; North Sunshine and Avondale Heights. For the order this was a first move to the missions, followed later by others, to the Philippines, England, Congo, United States, India and Brazil.

Sisters, you have followed Christ with what has been given to you, building on what is solid, on Christ, building Christ himself, who is the image of God. All of us here, your family, your Augustinian Order, your loved ones, your past and present students, your fellow parishioners, your companions on the journey and those you serve, honour the grace at work in you and praise God for it on this 60th anniversary celebration.

To come back to our gospel parable and the question it puts. We give thanks for the life and mission of the Venerable Teresa Spinelli, and the Augustinian Sisters Servants of Jesus and Mary whom she founded. Can we each also take up our lives in love and service, and do it with great generosity as they have done? Or as Jesus in telling the parable would put it, “Can you join me in my generosity?”