The Isaiah text today My thoughts are not your thoughts; nor are your ways my ways led me to recall that I had often wondered if anyone really goes to a Hell! Before you judge me as Pollyannaish or even possibly heretical, please hear me out. Are we not, over and over again, urged not to judge others. So, do we really know what happens within a person? .... between a person and their God? What we learn about God is that in the Divine there is no TIME. So, who knows what happens within a person in the few seconds or even the months or years during which a person is dying?

Ancient peoples, it is said, envisioned the world as flat with the sky as a dome and with Hades / Sheol / Hell beneath the surface. God was “up” (heaven); the Evil One (hell) was “down”. The Scriptures reflect that world view. Today, however, we know a different world view – the earth is round and it is relatively small in the midst of the vast universe or universes which seem to be expanding and changing all the time.

The forever-truth that God is everywhere stretches our imaginations each day in the framework of these versions of our world and challenges us to re-imagine heaven...Hell...God...Kingdom! The world as it was known by our ancestors has imploded and most of us have yet to catch up with that reality. The New Universe Story began to be recognized some half a century ago – not really so “new” and yet most of us have not yet internalized that reality, let alone allowing it to re-describe God for us! The words of Isaiah in our first reading confirm this challenge – My thoughts are not your thoughts... nor are my ways your ways. That raises questions about how really does God sees our world?

The gospel selection is from the sixth of seven sections of Matthew’s gospel, the section is entitled “Ministry in Judea and Jerusalem” and precedes the section called “The Passion, Death, and Resurrection”. The primary message of Jesus is the coming of God’s (kingdom) reign. Matthew presents Jesus moving from Galilee through Judea and on to Jerusalem. It is one of the 23 parables cited in the gospel of Matthew. Parables are a literary form that intend to keep us thinking to raise questions, to be open to a “twist”: So, why did the landowner go out five times to find workers? Was there a shortage of workers at the early hours? Was this year’s crop
super abundant? Were the first workers a bit slower at the task than the landowner had expected?

The expectations of the early workers seem to have brought out the worst in them (as they grumbled…) If the kingdom, the reign of God is like the landowner seeking helpers at dawn? What kind of human being is that landowner? He seems generous, and kind. He feels responsible for his vineyard. He likes to help other people. This parable does not reflect many of our American values – just payment for all, fairness in the workplace, we are paid for the kind and the amount of work we have done….. At times and according to several commentators, these parables are best understood in relation to what preceded and what follows.

What precedes it?
Prior to this parable, Matthew presents Jesus’ teaching on marriage, then, describes his encounter with and blessing of children. This is followed by the story of the rich young man who went away sad because he had many possessions and was not willing to change his ways. Finally, Matthew presents Peter speaking for himself and for the other disciples, asking What about us???? …we who have giving up everything to follow you???? Jesus’ answer includes regal language – they will sit upon 12 thrones and will receive a hundred times more plus eternal life – no mention of heaven or hell here….. The concluding sentence reflects the fact that we know well – the kingdom, the reign of God turns everything upside down.

What follows it?
Immediately following this parable is, according to Matthew, a third prediction of the Passion – of suffering and of death in Jerusalem. Then, the mother of James and John asks for special places for her two sons and the other disciples are incensed at her boldness. Finally, in the same chapter, we have Jesus’ encounter with two blind men who persistently crying out even though people around them are telling them to stop. Jesus asks “What do you want me to do for you? In their response lies the message of the parable today: Let our eyes be opened.

Who, then, is this God whose kingdom Jesus is proclaiming in this parable to us today in this our world so full of human contradictions and seeming evil?

In light of what precedes it and what follows it – with talk of the coming suffering and death of the One in whom the disciples had placed their hopes, listening to the question Jesus’ poses to the blind men – What do you want me to do for you? And their response….. Let our eyes be opened, we are invited to be open a brand-new sense of God.
We remember that parables and poetry often point us to “mystery”. I like to describe “mystery” as something about which I can always learn more. This parable perhaps can open our eyes just a little bit more in our daily search for God. This particular parable describes God as “generous” and the reign of God as those situations where generosity and kindness and love stand in contrast to the sense of fairness or entitlement and the attitude that “I deserve what I work for.”

Maybe, just maybe, this parable teaches us about the utter generosity (or mercy as last week’s parable stressed) of God even in as we are held accountable for what we do in our lives. Perhaps Divine generosity could mean that after death no one really goes to hell for ever.

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