

**Reflection on the Gospel- 27th Sunday in Ordinary Time Year A
(Matthew 21:33-43)**

-Veronica Lawson RSM

While the international community has long-since outlawed slavery, we have become increasingly aware of the persistence of a lucrative global industry structured around the sexual and labour enslavement of vulnerable people. Groups such as MGA (Mercy Global Action) and ACRATH (Australian Catholic Religious Against Trafficking of Humans) are taking action on behalf of those enslaved. Today's gospel features a parable about an absentee landowner with slaves to do his bidding. Commentators focus on almost every aspect of this parable: the landowner, the tenants, the fate of the "servants" and of the landowner's son, the interpretive comments that Jesus offers the chief priests and elders to whom the parable is addressed, the prophetic inter-texts and the allegorical elements in the text. Few consider the role or the fate of the slaves *as slaves* in the parable. Our contemporary sensibilities in relation to slavery invite a new reading of such texts, a reading that at the very least critiques the power that some in the Earth community exercise over others.

The frequent translation of the Greek *doulos* as "servant" rather than as "slave" masks the underlying reality that some members of the community, even within the circle of believers gathered at the Eucharistic table, were actually the property of others in the community. The fact is that nobody in the ancient world, not even Jesus of Nazareth, questioned this situation. It is not surprising, therefore, that the slaves in today's parable are considered by the "tenants" to be dispensable. Their role is to collect the produce from the harvest on behalf of the absentee landowner.

We can surmise that the "tenants" have legitimate grievances against the landowner. They clearly have no intention of parting with any portion of the produce, presumably the tax imposed on them as a condition of their tenancy. They react violently when confronted by the three slaves who are the landowner's emissaries. They beat one slave, kill another and stone yet another. Their treatment of the slaves is an implicit acknowledgement that the slaves represent the landowner whose demands they refuse to meet. The landowner risks the lives of other slaves by sending yet another and bigger delegation. This second group of emissaries meets the same fate as their predecessors. Finally, the landowner sends his own son in the expectation that the tenants will show him the respect they have denied the slaves, his property. In fact, the son receives the same treatment as the slaves. He too is dispensable from the perspective of those wanting to seize "the inheritance", those wishing to take control of the vineyard for their own purposes. As we reflect on gospel stories that take slavery for granted, we might commit ourselves to eliminating all exercise of power over others or over any "vineyard" entrusted to our care.