

6.64

Matthew 19:30—Last Shall Be First (English Poetry)

In Matthew 19:30, Jesus says, “Many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.” A little later, in Matthew 20:16, he repeats, “So the last will be first, and the first will be last.” This saying of Jesus has become a favorite of preachers, politicians, prophets, and poets. To sample the latter, we may consider lines of poetry from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries:

“Poem 1720” by Emily Dickinson (1830–86):

Had I known that the first was the last
I should have kept it longer.
Had I known that the last was the first
I should have drunk it stronger.

“The Times They Are a-Changin’” by Bob Dylan (1963):

As the present now
Will later be past
The order is rapidly fadin’
And the first one now will later be last
For the times they are a-changin’.

Dickinson’s take on Jesus’s famous line seems whimsical—or, perhaps, fatalistic. Dylan preserves the intended meaning of social upheaval.