

Septuagesima Sunday

Readings: I Corinthians 9:24-27; 10:1-5 and Matthew 20:1-16

"Are you envious because I am generous? Thus, the last shall be first and the first shall be last."



We have reached one of the turning places of the Church year. The green season of Sundays after Epiphany was a very short period of time, then a short period of white and already the church and the ministers are now being vested in purple. Up to this point in the Church year, our reference point has been looking towards Christmas--our Advent preparation, the twelve days of Christmas itself, the Epiphany and the Sundays after Epiphany, on which we commemorate the events by which Jesus revealed himself: the adoration of the Magi, the bar mitzvah at Jerusalem, the Baptism in Jordan, the wedding feast at Cana, and then the first of the healing miracles.

But from now on, our reference point is Easter, that great joyous festival of the Resurrection, which we will celebrate just nine weeks from today. Today we begin our preparation for the Easter feast—or, at least, our preparation for our celebration for the Easter feast.

The parable of the laborers in the vineyard, in today's Gospel, puts us into the frame of mind to anticipate the Resurrection.

The most widely listened to sermon in history, except, of course, for the Sermon on the Mount, is the Easter sermon of Saint John Chrysostom,. This sermon was first preached at Constantinople, where Chrysostom was the bishop, some sixteen hundred years ago. This same sermon is read at every Easter vigil in every Orthodox Church, and in many of our Roman and Anglican churches as well.

And this is how it begins:

If anyone is pious and loves God, let him rejoice in this beautiful festival.
If anyone is a good and faithful servant, let him enter into the joy of his Lord.
If anyone is weary from toil and fasting, let him come and receive his pay.
If anyone has labored from the first hour, let him receive his just reward.

If anyone has come after the third hour, let him join the feast with thankfulness. If anyone has waited until after the sixth hour, let him not worry, he will lose nothing.

If anyone has tarried until the ninth hour, let him come, also, and not hesitate.

If anyone has arrived only at the eleventh hour, let him not be afraid because of his delay.

For the Lord is gracious, and receives the last even as the first.

He gives rest to one who comes at the eleventh hour,

as well as to those who have toiled from the first.

To the one he gives, and upon the other he bestows gifts.

Chrysostom ties it all together in his sermon, because he shows that the pay (the "penny") earned by the workers in the harvest, is the gift of eternal life that is implicit in Easter. What does the laborer hear when he comes for his pay? "Well done, good and faithful servant, enter into the joy of your Lord; Come to me, all you who work hard and carry a heavy load and I will give you rest."

We as Christians are laborers in God's vineyard. The owner of the vineyard came to us and promised us a pretty penny if we would help bring in the harvest. Some have been out working in the fields since dawn; others since high noon; some only since mid-afternoon. And some showed up just an hour before quitting time.

And yet, each of us receives his penny.

In worldly economic terms, this would be a very foolish thing for an employer to do. If you pay people who work for only an hour the same wage that you pay to people who work all day, you will have a hard time finding any all-day workers. Besides which, you will be in big trouble with the Fair Labor Standards Commission and with the Farm Workers' Union. But the parable is not about worldly economics; it is about the economics of the Kingdom of Heaven. Worldly economics is the economics of scarcity; but heavenly economics is the economics of abundance. Jesus said, "I have come that you may have life, and that you may have it abundantly."

In the economics of the Kingdom, that penny is all you ever need. It is a penny of infinite worth.

In the parable, there is more than a hint of ingratitude among some of the

laborers. "We have been working all day in the heat, and yet these johnny-come-latelys are getting paid as much as we are!" The grumbling is like that of the older brother we heard in the parable of the Prodigal Son: "I've been working hard all this time, and he's been off wasting your money--so just why is he the one who gets the party?"

Jesus is cautioning us against the kind of smugness and self-righteousness that we might fall into if we were to forget that our salvation, our citizenship in the Kingdom, is not something we have earned or acquired by our own effort—it is always the free gift of God. We must not be envious of those who come to Jesus later than we do; rather we, like the angels in heaven, should rejoice over every lost sheep that is found, every prodigal son who comes home and every sinner that repents.

But, in another sense, there is joy and contentment to be found working in the vineyard, even if, as we work, we see in the distance that others are drinking, and partying, and running wild. Theirs is but an ephemeral kind of pleasure, like the fleeting pleasure enjoyed by the prodigal when he was off wasting his inheritance. True joy is to be found in the vineyard of the Lord, and in hearing the Master say: "Well done, good and faithful servant."

At first it may seem that Saint Paul's advice to the Corinthians contradicts the lesson of this parable, but that is not really so. The English theologian Ronald Knox (who died in 1957) said of today's Scripture lessons that the Gospel tells us it is never too late to be saved, while the Epistle tells us it is never ever too late to be lost.

Saint Paul uses an analogy from the sports world. (That is especially timely today, with the Super Bowl just around the corner this afternoon.) In his letter to the Corinthians, Saint Paul compares the Christian to a runner in a race and to a boxer; we may recall a similar passage in his letter to Saint Timothy where he compares the Christian to an athlete competing for a championship. In essence, Saint Paul says that just as an athlete must always stay in training, lest he lose the next race or the next bout, we Christians must always be in training to run with patience the race that is set before us.

But there is a difference. What the athlete is striving for is a corruptible prize. (In Paul's day, the winner of an athletic contest was awarded a crown of laurel

leaves, but the Lombardi trophy or an Olympic medal is really a corruptible prize as well). What the Christian is striving for is an incorruptible prize, the prize of eternal life with God.

Saint Paul's advice to the Christian is to remain focused on the goal: keep your eyes on the prize. Run to win, fight to win, and live to win. Do not let yourself get out of spiritual shape, any more than an athlete allows himself to get out of physical shape. Be disciplined, do not be like the boxer who tires himself out throwing wild punches and hitting only the air; make every punch count. Play by the rules: Saint Paul reminds Timothy that an athlete cannot win the championship unless he competes "lawfully." And, most of all, when you are running the race, do not give up, do not drop out, persevere to the end.

And here is another difference between the Christian life and an athletic contest. You know, in a race, all of the contestants run, but only one wins the prize. Only one team will win the Super Bowl today; only one entrant will take the gold medal in each Olympic event. But in the race that really matters, we can all be winners of a glorious crown that will not fade away. That prize was already won for us by Jesus Christ on that first Easter morning.

We begin today our preparation for our preparation for the big game. For a while, we must endure the rigors of preparation and the fare of the training table; but the victory party, the Easter feast, is already in sight. AMEN

