

“Go ye also into the vineyard, and whatsoever is right I will give you.” (St. Matthew 20.4)

Since Christmas, the lessons each week have been showing us how Jesus’ divine nature was revealed to different groups, and how we, in turn, can take that revelation and apply it in our lives. The last two weeks, in particular, we have seen Jesus revealed to the masses through some of his miracles. In all, we have come to learn more about just *how* Jesus is the divine in the flesh. Fully human and fully God. And now, the Church calendar makes us pivot sharply towards something else: for we are now looking ahead to the Cross.

Despite its many letters, the name of this Sunday gives us a clue as to the nature of the season. *Septuagesima* declares that we are (approximately) seventy days to Easter. Nine weeks away, and actually only 63 days. We are now in what’s sometimes called “pre-Lent”, or as I mention in the bulletin column, also “gesima-tide” or “shrove-tide”. The Sundays in this short pseudo-season use ordinal numbers to count us in – to lead us gently towards the inevitable Lent that is shortly to come. It’s like an orange sign on the side of the road warning you there is construction ahead, but in this case it declares “Lent ahead – buckle up”. For the punches really start flying early, as in the Collect for this Sunday we are reminded of our unworthiness to dwell in the sanctity of God, yet his great mercy and grace makes us worthy.

This short ‘season’ of Pre-Lent serves to transition us from the celebrations of Christmas (which officially comes to a close on Friday – Candlemas), and turn us towards the season of Lent. And in doing so, it serves to remind us of some of the basic foundations of our faith before we get to the hard task of self-examination through that season of Lent. So, we have some small changes in the service. The church is dressed in the colour purple again, yet we still have flowers at the Altar. The “alleluias” in the service go away, and soon enough so will the *Gloria in Excelsis*. We begin to slowly put on that penitential tone, but also acknowledge that we’re not *quite* there yet.

Appropriately, today’s lessons help us to ease into this new headspace as well. Starting from the very beginning, our Old Testament lesson introduces us to the first ‘day’ of God’s creation of the world. Beginning with Morning Prayer on Septuagesima, we start reading Genesis, then Exodus, and then Numbers. These books remind us of the beginning of the story of Salvation and Redemption that find their climax in the death and resurrection of Jesus. But first, we are reminded of the very core belief that underlines and is the foundation of all else: that we believe God to be the omnipotent, eternal, creator of the universe. This is assumed to be at the base of everything else we believe, but it doesn’t help to be reminded. God, powerful as he was, created the world out of *nothing*, and did so by a spoken word – “He commanded; it was done”.¹ This is a theological argument for why God is supreme, why Yahweh – the God of Israel – is *true God*. In the Nicene Creed we recite every week, this is the affirmation we make in belief of the first person of the Trinity: God the Father. This is the creator of the universe who sets in motion a plan to save his creation and bring them back to him. But what does this salvation look like?

In chapter 19 of Matthew’s account of the Gospel, Jesus is asked very similar questions. What is heaven? Who will be saved? What will we have? Jesus tells the parable we encountered today in order to answer some of these questions. He says, “the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard” (Matt. 20.1). This parable, no doubt familiar to you year after year, tells the story of hired labourers who come to be employed at different times of the day. Some are hired at the break of dawn, and more get called in even up to the 11th hour of the day. Those hired at dawn agreed to a full day’s wage, but yet at the end they are upset when those hired at the end of the day got the same amount of pay they did. When they complained, the master replied saying “Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?” (Matt. 20.15).

This was perhaps a surprise ending to those who were listening to Jesus tell it. It was not the way they understood the world to work. It’s a good thing, then, that Jesus wasn’t talking about this world

¹ Hymn 79 “Of the Father’s Love Begotten”, trans. J.M. Neale from the Latin of Prudentius (348-413)

at all, but was talking about the Kingdom of Heaven. It is much the same as the parable of the Prodigal Son in Luke 15: where the wasteful son came back to his father in shame expecting to pay for his mistakes, his father welcomed him with unexpectedly open arms. In each of these parables, “Jesus deliberately and cleverly [leads] the listeners along by degrees until they understood that if God’s generosity was to be represented by a man, such a man would be different from any man ever encountered.”² It shakes their understanding and worldview, and rightly so. For God’s generosity far surpasses our human knowledge, and his gift of grace, freely-given to all, cannot be excluded from the equation.

We can perhaps look at this story and apply it to ourselves, as Christians, as though we are either the early-hired workers or the 11th hour workers. We might think of ourselves in the shoes of those hired early on in the day, being a Christian is old-hat. In this case, the 11th hour workers might have come to faith on their deathbed. Does that make them any less Christian than “us”? Of course not, for this parable shows us that God rewards all those who come to him regardless of the hour. I would argue instead that we are all 11th-hour Christians. We are all those who are truly unworthy to come into the presence of God – as we say in the Prayer of Humble Access – but yet by the Grace of God and the gift he has given us in the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus, we are indeed made worthy to enter into God’s kingdom, even if it was at the twilight of our life. We will come to see, of course, in the next nine weeks, just how the price of our admission to heaven was indeed paid for us – we just need to enter the gate. Like the workers hired at the 11th hour, we are not too late to accept the generous grace of God that was freely extended to us.

This parable serves to remind us, too, of our humility – for who am I to be owed any more than anyone else? This stands in stark contrast to our society of entitlement and self-absorption. Rather than look out “for me”, we are called to be humble and look out and care for all who find themselves coming to Christ at any hour of the day. And, in preparation for the season of Lent, this parable serves as an encouragement towards a discipline of humility, repentance, and thankfulness.

This idea of discipline and self-restraint is one that St. Paul encourages in the athletic metaphor he tells the Christians in Corinth. He compares the mission to share the Christian message to an endurance race. The runners race to win a perishable crown that withers and dies – it is only of this earth. The runners in the marathon of faith run to win an imperishable crown – everlasting life with God. It is a long and arduous journey so Paul encourages discipline in order to keep going steadily – not wasting energy on things that will not help meet this goal. Like a runner trains their body to endure long distances, Paul trains his soul to be closer to God, and so must we if we are to win the race. We must be disciplined and exhibit self-control. This, too, is an act of humility before almighty God.

As we begin this new part of the Church’s year, may we be so inspired to look at our lives and start to make preparations for the upcoming Lenten season. May the examples of the virtues of temperance and discipline, as we encounter them in Scripture, help us to come with humility before Almighty God that we can acknowledge the grace he fills us with each and every day of our life. Of course, we are always called to draw near to God and cast away the ways of the world, but this time calls us to do so in earnest. To bask in the joy of our redeemer, we must first truly realize our need for one.

We all are 11th-hour workers in God’s vineyard. He doesn’t owe us anything, nor are we entitled to anything, yet he freely gives and *has* freely given. Thanks be to God for the victory he has given us in our Lord, Jesus Christ (1 Cor 15.57). May we give thanks to him in this house of worship, that he may continue to strengthen us with his grace for the journey ahead. May we answer God’s call as the master said to the workers: “You go into the vineyard too, and whatever is right I will give you” (Matt. 20.4).

And now unto God Almighty, the ✠ Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, be ascribed all might, majesty, dominion, power, honour, and glory as is most justly due. Henceforth and forevermore. Amen.

² D.A. Carson, “Matthew” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary...* (1984), 427.