

Extravagant Grace

Preached on Septuagesima Sunday

Trinity Anglican Church, WRJ

Jan. 31, 2021

Texts: 1 Cor. 9: 24-7; Matt. 20: 1-16

Today's liturgy, with its particular Collect, Epistle and Gospel, marks an important turning point in the Christian year. Students of liturgy would say that we have now completed the Christmas cycle—that is, Advent, Christmas and Epiphany—and we begin the Easter cycle—Lent, Holy Week, Easter, Ascension and Pentecost. Let's think for a moment about the meaning of those cycles.

In the weeks since the beginning of Advent, all our readings have centred around one theme: the expectation, the coming and manifestation—the Epiphany—of God, the Son of God, in our midst. Jesus is the word of God made flesh, full of grace and truth, manifest in wisdom and in power. Now, in this second cycle, which begins today, we turn our minds to consider God's work for our salvation in Jesus Christ—his ministry, his suffering and sacrifice, his triumph in Easter and Ascension, and his sending of the Holy Spirit. So, the first cycle is about God's coming among us in Jesus Christ, the second is about his work for our salvation.

The three Sundays with Latin names—Septuagesima, Sexagesima and Quinquagesima—are really meant to constitute our preparation for that second cycle, and the scripture lessons will now reflect that. Given that today is Septuagesima Sunday, we should note that at one time in the early days of the Church, Septuagesima was actually the beginning of Lent, the day on which catechumens—new converts to Christianity—were first in church to begin their preparation for baptism at Easter. We are approximately seventy days before Easter, and some in the early Church saw these as recapitulating the seventy years of the Babylonian Captivity. Just as the Hebrews, we are to press on, repent of our sins, subdue our ungodly desires, and return to God. We, just as those early catechumens, are seeking to free ourselves from all that hinders us as we run toward the incorruptible prize won for us by passion, death, and resurrection of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

In the Epistle lesson, from St. Paul's first epistle to the Corinthians, we are reminded of the discipline which Christian life involves. Like those athletes in that great marble stadium near Corinth, we must direct all our energies towards attaining the prize—not a crown of wilting laurel leaves, but the imperishable crown of eternal life. We must not run erratically, nor waste our energies shadow-boxing; rather, we must become disciplined athletes of God. As Paul says, we must pommel our body and subdue it.

Then, in our Gospel lesson, all the labourers called at various times to the vineyard each received a denarius. Those who came at the last, eleventh hour received the same as those who had borne the burden and heat of the day. Well, imagine an early Christian congregation, which no doubt included many who had indeed borne the burden and heat

of the day; many for whom their Christian profession had not been easy. Perhaps some of them had even been tortured in persecutions. They were reminded that the reward of these newcomers, these catechumens, must be the same as theirs.

In Jesus's parable, those who had worked all day, or at least from noon, resented the fact that those hired at the end of the day received the same pay as they did. It wasn't fair!

But the householder replied to one of them,

“Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what belongs to you and go. I choose to give to this last worker as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?”

Those hired earlier revealed their “evil eye”, as the King James has it. The “evil eye” in the New Testament is a metaphor for covetousness and greed. When we covet, our perspective is perverted, our eye becomes evil. We are unable to see God's goodness because we're too focused on what we think we deserve. We are unable to see the blessings around us because we're so focused on what our flesh wants. So those who suffered in the early Church, and all of us today, are not allowed to begrudge God's kindness to anyone, no matter how new to the faith or lacking in battle scars they may be. We must always keep in mind as we approach Lent that our salvation is finally, at the end of the day, not something we have earned. It is God's gracious gift, which we can only accept with thankful humility.

Lent does not officially begin for us Western Christians today, and the idea of “pre-Lent” can sound strange to the ear. But, in fact, from before the early middle ages until the latter half of the 20th Century, all liturgical churches in the West had this pre-Lent season. Its removal from most modern calendars was indeed part of the liturgical reforms that resulted from the 19th and 20th century Liturgical Movement that culminated in the Second Vatican Council in the 1960's. But our 1928 lectionary retains the same pre-Lenten readings that were there in the early centuries of the Church. We do this because they are the ideal first step in the preparation of our minds for Lent and for what follows Lent. They insist upon two essential points, as relevant today as ever they were.

The first is this: Christian life is a life of discipline—discipline of mind, discipline of heart, discipline of will. We must train ourselves and shape our lives in ways consonant with our calling: in humility, in thankfulness, in charity, in temperance, and so on, mindful of our goal. We dare not run erratically, nor waste our time and energy beating empty air. We must concentrate on our task; that is what the discipline of Lent is all about.

And the second point is this: for all our labour and struggle, we do not *earn* salvation. Salvation is the free gift of God's mercy and his grace. It is God who calls us to the vineyard, perhaps at the eleventh hour, and the prize is his free and generous gift. The master of the vineyard asks: “Is it not lawful for me to do as I will with what is my own?” It is indeed his own, won by him in the saving work of Jesus Christ, and it is ours only by faith in him. *We have not earned it.*

Nothing could be more relevant than these two points—our discipline and God’s free gift of salvation—as we prepare ourselves for Lent. The pre-Lenten season then ends up being something of a transition time between Epiphanytide and Lent. While we’re not yet into the Lenten fast, there is certainly a penitential tone to these three Sundays. We see this in the change from green to violet as the liturgical color. We also see this in the widespread omission of the “Alleluia” responses and the *Gloria in Excelsis* in the liturgy. Perhaps the most obvious witness to the penitential character is the Collects for these Sundays. Consider, for example, today’s Collect:

O Lord, we beseech thee favorably to hear the prayers of thy people, that we, who are justly punished for our offenses, may be mercifully delivered by thy goodness, for the glory of thy Name; through Jesus Christ our Savior, who liveth and reigneth with thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end. Amen.

Here we see the two key elements of repentance: 1) acknowledgement of our sin and the fact that we deserve to be punished for them; and 2) trust in God’s goodness and mercy in delivering us from our sin.

Sometimes these penitential parts of our liturgy are criticized for being overly focused on our sin. Isn’t that focus too negative? What about God’s mercy? Well, the classical Prayer Book recognizes that we won’t truly understand God’s mercy and goodness if we don’t understand our sin. To see how truly amazingly good God is, we have to understand that we don’t deserve his mercy. We have nothing to bring to the table but what God has given us. As we say at the offering, “All things come of thee, O Lord, and of thine own have we given thee.” Any goodness or righteousness we have is a gift from God, and only comes about through Christ’s perfect goodness and righteousness. We deserve death and hell, but God has chosen to give us mercy instead.

This is the Gospel. God’s grace is extravagant, it doesn’t make sense from a human perspective, and it really isn’t fair. If you want fairness, look to the Buddhist and Hindu idea of Karma. That’s where everyone gets exactly what they deserve. But the Gospel isn’t like that at all. In the Gospel, God’s grace lavishes upon us goodness that we would never deserve.

It may seem that our Gospel’s focus on God’s grace is a bit at odds with Paul’s idea of running for the prize or slugging it out in the boxing ring. But remember that it is by God’s grace that we get to run and fight. If one becomes sedentary, he or she looks at exercise as unwelcome pain. But while exercise can be difficult to begin, it’s also very pleasurable after you get into the swing of it. As our bodies get used to movement again, the better we feel, both physically and psychologically. The spiritual disciplines are the same way. Christian discipline may sound overly demanding to our flesh, but the benefits really do show the goodness of God in our lives. As our Collect said, his mercy is for our deliverance and his glory. May our upcoming Lent and “Pre-Lent” reveal that goodness first hand.

In the Name...