

With this Sunday’s services, we commence the Pre-Lenten Season, a rite that dates back to the Sixth Century. Today’s liturgy, with its special 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. In the weeks since the beginning of Advent, all our Collects, Epistles and Gospels have centred around one theme: the expectation, the coming and manifestation – the Epiphany – of God, the Son of God, in our midst – 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 Collect sets the tone for this season with its prayerful request for merciful deliverance from the justified afflictions that result from our sinful activities as humans. It reflects several things; knowledge that a time of struggle and effort is ahead of us; acceptance that this time is a justified result of our activities, and a request for mercy in dealing with us. It is truly a penitential theme, which will pervade our worship activities for the next nine Sundays as we approach Easter.

The Epistle picks up on this theme using the metaphor of athletic competition, and the need to exercise physical self-control, discipline and endurance to reach an athletic goal. Similarly, these same traits are needed to reach our spiritual goal of eternal life, and Lent is the period of competition or trial during which we learn to exercise them. The first of two strong points to take away from our readings today 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 the goal we seek. We must concentrate on our task – that is what the discipline of Lent is all about.

But the Gospel for today is what I really want to focus on, and I want to start with a true story. A socialist once came to see the great and rich industrialist, Andrew Carnegie. Soon he was railing against the injustice of Carnegie having so much money. In his view, wealth was meant to be divided equally. Carnegie asked his secretary for an assessment of everything he owned and at the same time looked up the figures on world population. He did a little arithmetic on a pad and then said to his secretary. "Give this gentleman 16 cents. That's his share of my wealth." A fair settlement, yes?

“Fairness” is a human construct, not a divine one. “Fairness” is what we humans have devised to help guide our interactions with each other, but it is not applicable to God’s interaction with humans, as much as we might wish it were so. God doesn’t need to be “fair” with us; He created us, and He can and does do with us what He wants. Yet because we humans insist on trying to apply our idea of “fairness” to God, God’s grace can sometimes seem unfair. Our Gospel today tells the story of the apparent unfairness of God’s grace. It’s a parable about workers and their wages in a vineyard. It begins with the landowner’s gracious offer of jobs to workers for hire, as the text states in verse 1, “A landowner went out at dawn to hire laborers for his vineyard.” In those days and in that culture, people were hired by the day. An agreement or contract was made when someone was employed. The first workers were more than happy to receive the opportunity to work at the wages offered.

A few hours later, the landowner saw more workers. He instructed them to go to the fields where they would have a job and he would pay them what was just. They too were delighted to have the job at the wage offered. This process went on all day long, even to the point of hiring some who worked only for the last few moments of sunlight.

Finally the day was over. Work was finished and it was time for everyone to receive payment. According to the custom of the day, those hired last came first to be paid; the first workers would be paid last. The late workers were paid their wage. Then the early workers approached the landowner for their payment. To their surprise, they received the same amount as those who had only worked for an hour. They objected, arguing that they had worked longer; endured the heat of the day; so they should receive more money. The landowner’s response was, “My friend(s) I am not cheating you. Did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage?”. He adds further that the job is his to give, not theirs to demand. He owns the vineyard. He concludes with a stinging question, “Are you envious because I am generous?”

The key word in the landowner’s defense of his wages is agreement. This word in the Greco Roman world was commonly used to describe a covenant or contractual arrangement. The landowner’s point was that he had offered the same to all the workers. They had all agreed. Furthermore, the terms of his covenant were completely gracious. It was a gracious agreement because it was given to all without discrimination or distinction.

The parable is a picture of entrance into the kingdom of God by a covenant. God deals with His world and creatures by making an agreement with them. All are equal in the sight of God: rich or poor; famous or infamous; young or old. The terms of the covenant are the same for all. All may come to God through Jesus Christ, His Only Begotten Son. Like the landowner, God offers us a place in His vineyard, **if** we accept His terms. We can come in no matter when, yet we all must come in the same way. We are freely accepted because of a payment made by someone else, Jesus Christ; it’s that simple. It is so fair that it seems unfair. **It seems unfair because God’s grace gives not what we deserve, but what we need. Let me repeat – it seems unfair because God’s grace gives not what we deserve, but what we need.** In this day and age of “rights” and “fairness” and “tolerance”, this point is difficult to comprehend. God is not here to be “fair” or “right” or “tolerant” to us. We need to thank God that His grace is not to give us what we deserve, but what we need, and without regard to what extent or for how long we have needed it! God, as the master of the vineyard, is expressing both the capability and the willingness to admit all who have true faith and repentance to the kingdom of heaven, irregardless of when they start practicing that faith. It is a statement of one of the cornerstones of Anglican belief, that heaven cannot be earned; it is a freely given gift of God, and as such, it ignores any earthly concept of fairness or justice. This is the second major point to take away from today’s readings: 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 last, 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.

Taken as a group, the readings for this Sunday define the straight and narrow path that we will attempt to walk between now and Easter. Paraphrasing and expanding on an observation stated in Massey Shepherd’s The Oxford American Prayer Book Commentary, the Epistle warns us that it is never too late to be damned; the Gospel reminds us that it is never too late to be saved, and the Collect prays that we, understanding those implications, may mercifully be allowed to avoid the one and be granted the other.

The upcoming weeks will provide each of us an excellent opportunity for further development of the kind of knowledge and belief that allows us to avoid one conclusion and embrace the other. I encourage you to start thinking about how you can best make use of the opportunities that will present themselves. Lent is much more than giving up some sweets, or vowing to lose some weight. Lent is a time to strengthen and expand the spiritual side of our existence. Lent is a time to refresh and renew our store of spiritual sustenance, for a time when it will be needed. And these “gesima” Sundays are what prepare us for the rigors that are ahead. It is never too late to be damned; it is never too late to be saved; and it is never too early to understand the implications between the two, and take active effort to pursue salvation. My prayer today is that each of you will make the most of the upcoming season to understand the true content and significance of the period we are starting. *Amen.*

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