

Septuagesima 2006

Sometimes I wonder if the readings for Mass were chosen by a mediaeval humorist! They often seem to have no connection with one another except on special feast days. This Sunday's readings seem even more contradictory than most.

The Epistle says: "All run in a race, but only one receives the prize", thus urging the early Christians to put every effort into winning that prize by their good works. Yet the Gospel tells of the benevolent master who pays the same wage to all his workers, even to those who have been hired at the very end of the day – the eleventh hour – and done very little work compared to those who have toiled away since early morning.

But maybe the choice was not so crazy, or maybe it was made to show that God is a bit crazy – at least as the world reckons craziness. The world has always seen the Gospel of Jesus Christ as a scandal. The Good News is that God in Jesus Christ has forgiven us our sins and is willing – nay eager – to welcome us into his life which we call heaven. This is the scandal of the Gospel. This is why they crucified the Lord. He lived in such a way that he was called "a glutton and a wine-bibber, the friend of publicans and sinners". He said of a pretty notorious lady: "Her sins, which are many, are forgiven, for she loved much".

This is good news for sinners, good news for you and me, sinners as we are. Nothing brings home to me the privilege of ministering the Sacrament of Penance more than the very last thing I say to you before you leave the confessional: "Go in peace; the Lord has put away thy sins – and pray for me, a sinner."

But for the self-righteous, for those who think themselves to be something, for those who look for privileges and despise others, there is no Good News, no Gospel. They are scandalized, as were the early workers in the vineyard, that newcomers who had lazed around for most of the day, should receive the same reward. They are the people who tend to quote St Paul out of context and insist that he taught that only the elect would be saved, only a few would win the races and gain salvation. And sadly they are often those who have given much of their lives to the Church who imply that only they will reach heaven, while all the others will be damned.

But this kind of person has not heard our Lord at his Last Supper: "This is my blood of the new covenant, which will be shed for you and for *many*", or his words "I will that *all* shall be saved".

The solution of this seeming contradiction is one that is familiar to us in many realms of Christian experience. The Church has always found that heresy flourishes when a simple-minded solution to a religious Mystery is sought. Either-Or has to give place to Both-And. For example:

Either Jesus was God or he was a man. The Monophysites said he was God only – which made his entire human life a sham. The Nestorians said he was Man only, which made

God remote again and our incorporation into God a sham. But the Catholic Church said: He is both God and Man in one Person, the Person of the Son of God, thus maintaining the truth of the humility of God and the boundless divine destiny of man.

Or, to give another example of the barrenness of Either-Or: Either the Sacrament is bread or it is the Body of Christ. If it is just bread, our rite is just a fond memory of the Last Supper. If it is just the Body of Christ, our rite is a magical ceremony. But if it is both bread and wine and the Body and Blood of Christ, as the Catholic Church maintains, then our rite is the taking of ordinary material things and divinizing them, the first sign of the divinization of the whole creation which is our ultimate destiny.

The Catholic Church has always proclaimed that the Good News of the Gospel is a paradox. It is false to say that Jesus Christ is only God or that he is only a man. It is false to say that the Sacrament is only bread and wine or that the Sacrament is only the Body and Blood of Christ. It is false to say that God is only one Person or that there are three Gods. The Church has always taught that the truth is always greater than the measure of man's mind, that God is greater than our imagination can conceive.

So, to return to where we began, the metaphor of the race, and the story of the workers in the vineyard, it is heresy to say that our salvation depends entirely on our own efforts, and it is heresy to say that, no matter what we do, God has already predestined us to heaven or to hell. As usual the Catholic teaching is Both-And. We are both free and also entirely dependent on the grace of God. Someone has summed it up in the saying:

“Work as though it all depends on you; and pray as though it all depends on God.”

We are both free and also in the hand of God, and we are never freer than when we are doing his will. That is why the eleventh-hour men received the whole penny. They responded when offered the work. As the prophet Samuel said: “The Lord looketh not on the outward appearance, but the Lord looketh on the heart.” It is the willingness that matters, not how much is achieved.

In the same way, the true measurement of life is not duration. It is not time, it is intensity that is life's measurement. Our Lord died at thirty three but he said: “I have finished the work thou gavest me to do”. God measures not the length of a life, but its depth, its depth of love, service and sacrifice.

God grant that you and I can learn to live like eleventh-hour men, waiting to be called to work in the vineyard, or, to use St Paul's metaphor, willing to run the race that is set before us “looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith.”

Then every one of us will receive our penny, the token that we are the Lord's. And on that penny will be the mark of the great King of all, the mark of the Cross of Jesus Christ. If we share that cross, run the race that he ran, work willingly in his vineyard, whenever we are called, we will be welcomed into God's heaven. Then we shall have all eternity to rest, to live and to love.

Let me finish by quoting the lovely poem by Bishop Lancelot Andrewes, called The Dial. It is like a peal of bells celebrating the fact that God is in control of all time. Each verse ends with, as it were, the largest, deepest bell, booming out the little phrase “And save us”. Here it is:

Thou who hast put the times and seasons in thine own power
Grant that we make our prayer unto thee in a time
Convenient and when Thou may’st be found
and save us.

Thou who for us men and for our salvation wast born at dead of night:
Give us daily to be born again by renewing of the Holy Ghost,
Till Christ be formed in us unto a perfect man,
and save us.

Thou who very early in the morning while the sun was yet arising didst rise from the dead:
Raise us up daily unto newness of life
Suggesting to us ways of repentance which thyself knowest
and save us.

Thou who at the third hour didst send down thy Holy Ghost on the apostles:
Take not away the same spirit from us,
But renew him daily within us,
and save us.

Thou who hast willed the ninth hour to be an hour of prayer:
Hear us while we pray in the hour of prayer and
Make us to obtain our prayer and our desires
and save us.

Thou who didst vouchsafe
Even at the eleventh hour of the day to send men into thy vineyard and to fix a wage,
notwithstanding they had stood all the day idle:
do unto us like favour and, though it be late, as it were about the eleventh hour, accept us
graciously when we return to thee,
and save us.