

*THE kingdom of heaven is like unto a man that is an householder, which went out early in the morning to hire labourers into his vineyard.*

In the middle of the darkest term of the year we are invited to labour. This is never an easy message to give or receive. ‘and they received every man a penny’. We expect some inflation of course, but the prize, a penny, does not seem inspiring either. St Paul echoes the call of the Gospel parable, inviting us to a race and a great prize. once again, the invitation to ‘keep under’ our bodies, and bring the body ‘into subjection’, may not inspire, even if we are offered an incorruptible crown. Does this incorruptible crown have the kind of emotional appeal to compensate for the trouble?

I propose to consider not only the call to labour, but also the prize—can we see what is being offered, and will that make a difference. Once we’ve done that, we might consider why we read this passage alongside the opening verses of the book of Genesis. We are being invited here to see the connection between what God calls us to do, and the big picture of God’s purposes for all things, all time.

First, it’s helpful to say a few words about why we read this passage now. Septuagesima is one of those turning point Sundays. Since Xmas, we have lived and prayed in the light which shines from Bethlehem and the manger. We have looked upon the manifestation of the divine life in the person of the Lord Jesus in miracles and displays of wisdom. We have considered how his divine life may be manifest in us. With Septuagesima, coming from the Latin word for 70, for roughly 70 days before Easter, we turn toward the cross and resurrection. Lent begins on Ash Wednesday, but with these Gesima Sundays we take stock, we consider the path set before us.<sup>1</sup>

*THE kingdom of heaven is like unto a man that is an householder, which went out early in the morning to hire labourers into his vineyard.*

Gregory the Great sums up the meaning of the parable for us succinctly:

The Master of the household, that is, our Creator, has a vineyard, that is, the Church universal. [This vineyard] has borne so many stocks, as many saints as it has put forth from righteous Abel to the very last saint who shall be born in the end of the world.

In the Bible the people of Israel often described as a vineyard. The vineyard is a picture of the kind of attentiveness and care which is required for the people to flourish. Vineyard, image of the good or bad vines which make it up. Gregory continues:

To instruct this His people as for the dressing of a vineyard, the Lord has never ceased to send out His labourers; first by the Patriarchs, next by the teachers of the Law, then by the Prophets, and at the last by the Apostles, He has toiled in the cultivation of His vineyard [E]very man, in whatsoever measure or degree he has joined good action with right faith, has been a labourer in the vineyard.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> It’s difficult to go abruptly from one spiritual or mental state to another. So a few weeks before the effort of Lent is to begin, the Church calls our attention to its seriousness and invites us to mediate on its significance. ‘Before we can practice Lent we are given its meaning.’ Alexander Schmemmann.

<sup>2</sup> Catena Aurea, Toal *Sunday Sermons of the Church Fathers*, vol 1, pp 360 ff, or <http://www.lectionarycentral.com/septuag/CatenaAurea.html>

It's a beautiful description, it sees different times of day as different ages in the world. We can also see the parable as a description of different times in our lives – some called early, some leave and are called back, some are called later.

It is never too late. God in Christ, speaking in those he sends, addressing us in situations, circumstances, or people, speaking in His voice in our conscience or in ideas, God is searching us, calling us by name, and it never too late to respond.

If the vineyard is an image for the Church, for the life of being a disciple of Christ, then we may recognize here an invitation to take up the work of Lent. On Ash Wednesday, we will be invited in the name of the householder 'to the observance of a holy Lent, by self-examination and repentance; by prayer, fasting, and self-denial; and by reading and meditating on God's holy word'. An anonymous early commentator on this passage links this labour with the reward for which we work:

'For the vineyard of God has not been planted outside of us but inside of our very selves. Whoever does good works cultivates it in himself. But when the righteous of God is cultivated in our senses, it produces a cluster, that is, Christ. For whoever works righteousness forms Christ in himself, as it is written, "My little children, with whom I am again in travail until Christ be formed in you!"'<sup>3</sup>

This is another way of saying what St Gregory did: 'every man, in whatsoever measure or degree he has joined good action with right faith, has been a labourer in the vineyard'.

Like the vineyard, the denarius translated as penny is also symbolic. St Jerome, the great translator of the Bible, sees the gift not as a thing, but as a person. He imagines Christ speaking to the dissatisfied labourers:

A denarius bears the figure of the king. You have therefore received the reward which I promised you, that is, my image and likeness; what desirest thou more?<sup>4</sup>

On one level, the payment received at the end of the day is our daily wage, our daily bread, the grace which is sufficient for our labour. The denarius is also the reward of all our labour, it 'is the token simply of salvation'<sup>5</sup>, 'The denarius is life eternal, and in the life eternal all will be equal'.<sup>6</sup>, The denarius is Christ, Christ formed in us, the grace of God given to us, and Christ is the reward in and at the end of our labours, the cluster of grapes which the vineyard produces.

It's important to see here the danger of envy. The gift is disproportionate. We cannot earn this wage – it is God's gift. And yet, we are tempted to envy others because we think that we have not received our fair share, or that they have received more. There is lots one could say, but perhaps we might note that this envy blinds us so that we cannot see the gift.

What is offered is already wonderful, but we are invited to see here a bigger picture. If we are being prepared to labour, we are also being prepared to appreciate the greatness of the reward.

We have already heard from Gregory the Great. He appears to have formalized the practice of reading Genesis on Septuagesima. For Gregory and for the authors of the early Church, Genesis was not a book of evolutionary biology. The early Church found in Genesis not only a description of the ordered creation of all things by God, but of the

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<sup>3</sup> *Ancient Christian Texts: Incomplete Commentary on Matthew (Opus imperfectum)*, Vol 2. Trans J. A. Kellerman, p 273.

<sup>4</sup> *Catena*, *ibid.* Toal, p 364. It continues: 'And yet, it is not that thou shouldest have more, but that another should have less than thou seekest. "Take that is thine, and go thy way."'

<sup>5</sup> Origen

<sup>6</sup> Augustine, For although through diversity of attainments the saints will shine, some more, some less, yet as to this respect, the gift of eternal life, it will be equal to all'

ordered re-creation of all things in Christ. We read it now, because destination of Lent is a new creation, a new genesis. Early commentators had confidence that what Genesis reveals about creation of heaven and earth speaks to us also of the new creation in Christ.<sup>7</sup>

Christians often feel like we need to read the book of Genesis with some embarrassment. We don't know if the author of Genesis intended to provide an account of a creation in six 24 hour days. (Of course, we are not constrained by the authors' intentions, like early commentators, we invited to ask purposes of God the Holy Spirit in what we have received, in addition to all that we can find out about how the text has come to us and what a study of history, language, culture, etc can tell us).

Is it a blunder, naivety, or something more profound that light is created on day 1, but we only get the sun and moon on day 4? If we were to make the experiment of assuming that there is something insightful in reading Genesis to prepare for Easter, what might we find in these few verses of Genesis?

Anastasius of Sinai, writing at end of 6<sup>th</sup> century, sums up a lot of tradition of early Church. God prepared all things, heavens and on earth, 'as a type and sketch of the new existence', by means of all creation, God glorifies Christ, who speaks in and through it.<sup>8</sup>

Christ is the Word of the Father through whom all things are made: 'the Creator-Word "when he was giving substance to heaven and earth and the things within them ... also wove within [them] the mystery of his incarnation"'.<sup>9</sup>

'Learning these things, the Church rejoices and exalts. In is enlightened and leaps for joy. It is edified and strengthened'

Is this true? Are we edified and strengthened? Next few minutes are an experiment – is Anastasius correct, can we be strengthened for our labour, for our race, by seeing these things?

### ***In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.***

One of the questions which exercised the early interpreters was whether this verse described a beginning in time, or a beginning before time. For many, they heard here a description of the Beginning before the beginning, the Son 'eternally begotten of the Father'. The beginning, the principle, the archetype before all beginnings is the Word of God through whom all things were made. This is displayed artistically in those mosaics or paintings which the pre-Incarnate Son is shown holding a rolled up scroll. He stands outside of time, to create in time. He is the beginning or archetype who communicates to the created order a logic or reason which enables us to probe the wisdom of what is created.

Taking us back before the Big Bang, which gets us about as close as possible to a scientific picture of a creation from nothing, Genesis offers more than a description of the temporal beginning of physical reality. It also points to 'the ultimate source of being and order'.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> prepare for our journey toward the re-creation of humanity which God the Son accomplishes on the first Easter Sunday by beginning to read the account of the first creation.

<sup>8</sup> *Anastasius of Sinai: Hexaemeron (Orientalia Christiana Analecta 278)*, Clement Kuehn and John Baggarly, S.J., eds. and trans., (Rome 2007). Cyril the Great 'throughout all of the mosaic passages about the six-day creation, the mystery of Christ and the Church was proclaimed' p 11

<sup>9</sup> (τὸ τῆς σαρκώσεως συμπλέκει μυστήριον). Paul M. Blowers, *Drama of the Divine Economy: Creator and Creation in Early Christian Theology and Piety*, p 132, quoting Anastasius of Sinai, died after 700 ad.

<sup>10</sup> 'God, physics and the Big Bang', WILLIAM R. STOEGER, SJ in *The Cambridge Companion to Science and Religion*, p 181: 'Thus, the creator is always sustaining, or conserving, all that is in its existence. This is the *creatio continua* side of *creatio ex nihilo*, the metaphorical term which refers to this particular idea of 'creation' which has dominated the

***And God said...***

The Father speaks or begets his Word. The Spirit hovers over the face of the water, over the face of creation coming to be. God the Holy Trinity, manifest at the Baptism of Christ in the Jordan at the beginning of the shining forth of Epiphany, is also manifest here in the first verses of the Bible.

Christ is prophesied, and the re-creation of human nature by the new creation of baptism is also prophesied.

***Let there be light.***

Again, why do we have light on day 1, but the sun and moon on day four? One of the common explanations in the early Church was that God the creation of light is the creation of the angels, creatures with intelligence and will.<sup>11</sup> There is an interesting connection between St Augustine's view of how the angels praised God's wisdom in his creatures, and the giving of a principle of change to creation. For Augustine, the Angels delighted in seeing the divine ideas or imprint [*rationes seminales*] in created things. These imprints of the divine wisdom, these ideas were not static, but contained the possibility of change and development, in modern terms, evolution, within the ordering purposes and wisdom of God. Of course, it would be simplistic to suggest an easy correspondence between Augustine and theories of intelligent design. But it is significant to see that in the rich investigations of the book of Genesis in the early Church, one finds the great themes which are still at heart of searching of both scientists and theologians.<sup>12</sup> What the scientists and theologians discover is no surprise to the Word and Wisdom of God who still speaks in all things.

Anastasius, the great abbot of St Catherine's monastery, also heard in these words, 'Let there be light', another prophecy of the re-creation of all things in Christ.

In these words, let there be light, Christ is revealed, He is '*the true light, who illuminates every person coming into the world. Let there be:* through birth, let him come openly. This is, let him be formed and receive a body'.<sup>13</sup>

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mono- theistic theological traditions. It follows from this that creation is not about a temporal beginning of physical reality – although we cannot completely rule that out – but about an ontological origin, the ultimate source of being and order. Thus, also, the relationship of creation does not effect change, as do other physical causes. God, as primary cause, is a necessary condition, or cause, for all that happens.'

<sup>11</sup> Chapter 9.— What the Scriptures Teach Us to Believe Concerning the Creation of the Angels. (Augustine, Book I, *City of God*): For when God said, "*Let there be light, and there was light,*" if we are justified in understanding in this light the creation of the angels, then certainly they were created partakers of the eternal light which is the unchangeable Wisdom of God, by which all things were made, and whom we call the only-begotten Son of God; so that they, being illumined by the Light that created them, might themselves become light and be called "*Day,*" in participation of that unchangeable Light and Day which is the Word of God, by whom both themselves and all else were made. "*The true Light, which lights every man that comes into the world,*" John 1:9 — this Light lights also every pure angel, that he may be light not in himself, but in God; from whom if an angel turn away, he becomes impure, as are all those who are called unclean spirits, and are no longer light in the Lord, but darkness in themselves, being deprived of the participation of Light eternal. For evil has no positive nature; but the loss of good has received the name "*evil.*"

<sup>12</sup> Paul M. Blowers, *Drama of the Divine Economy: Creator and Creation in Early Christian Theology and Piety*, p 148: 'Did not the Hexaemeral narrative, especially within the larger context of Genesis, depict the Creator's dynamic interaction with the cosmos as the ongoing theatre of his creative and recreative activity? What God projects "instantaneously" is the potential for created nature both to fulfill and transcend itself through his transformative grace, which is at once immanent and transcending. Indeed, created nature as such is essentially a field of movement (*κίνησις*), not just local movement but the movement, says Gregory, of change (*τροπή*) and alteration (*ἀλλοίωσις*), beginning with the "change" from nothingness to being when potential creation was actualized'.

<sup>13</sup> Anas. *Hex.* p. 27

And notice, how Anastasius takes us back to the vineyard, and to the labour to which we have been called:

Let there be light, 'Let Christ appear upon the earth, And God's Holy Spirit was there also, which was borne upon the water ... First baptism was given, and then, as a sort of seal, faith in it, 'let a life pleasing to God become active, shining before [all people] as a light' according to Christ who said so. And seeing this way of life, God approved. For God saw the light of the life, and he said that it was good. He approved because he rejoices in such light. ... joy arises at just one sinner who changes his way of thinking.<sup>14</sup>

Let a life pleasing to God become active --- this is what we see in the labours called to the vineyard, and this, brothers and sister is the life to which we are called now.

First baptism was given, and then, as a sort of seal, faith in it, 'let a life pleasing to God become active, shining before [all people] as a light' And seeing this way of life, God approved.

Whether we have been working in the vineyard for many years, whether hanging around the edge wondering whether or not to get involved, whether we have come and gone, we are called again. We have been re-made in Christ, and the work of our new Genesis, our new creation is not complete. this is our goal and destination , and so we hear of the first genesis again today. 'Learning these things, the Church rejoices and exalts. In is enlightened and leaps for joy. It is edified and strengthened'

'And seeing this way of life, God approved.' We are not left without the reward of our labours, and it's not a reward for which we need to wait. The Householder who gave a denarius comes today in the sacrament of his body and blood. The little wafer is stamped with an image also, a living image, an image which is stamped in us, and which is given for our food. Let us not be like the labourers who are blinded by envy. The reward seems small, from the outside, the rewards of the divine life always seems small. But from the inside, we discover a kingdom.

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<sup>14</sup> rough quotation/paragraph Anas. Hex. p 43