

Getting to know the 'Gesimas

Sermon preached at Pusey House on Septuagesima Sunday, 2015 by the
Principal, the Reverend Dr George D Westhaver

*Friend, I do thee no wrong;Is it not lawful for me to do
what I will with mine own? Is thine eye evil, because I am
good?*

Season of Epiphany drawing to close. These past weeks we have been turned to gaze more and more on the divine light manifest in Christ. Last week, the conversion of St Paul and the bright shining of the divine light which accompanied it made clear again that the divine life which we worship and adore this season is manifest not only in Christ, but also in the members of His body. Christ shines with divine goodness, wisdom and love, so that we, the members of his Body, and the whole world may be transformed, water into wine, the great persecutor of the church, Saul, into her great champion, and we, in our own measure also: water to wine, sinners to saints.

During part of this past week I attended a seminar the focus of which was the work of the great theologian of the East, Dionysius the Aeropogite. According to Dionysius, everything that exists, the whole created order, is epiphany, a theophany or manifestation of the divine life. The whole creation is in some way stamped with the divine image, not in same way as human

beings made especially in the image of God, but nonetheless bearing some impress of the divine life which is their ultimate origin. The works of creation are like another book alongside the book of the divine word, and this second book praises and address the creator. Dionysius makes this point by considering Psalm 22. Since the psalm begins with the words which our Lord makes his own on the cross – my God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me – the Church has always heard the voice of Christ in the verses of this psalm. Dionysius points especially to verse 6 as speaking of Christ in a paradoxical way: I am a worm, and no man, the very scorn of men. We can hear in these words an echo of the first cry of dereliction, emphasizing the humiliation of the cross. Dionysius also argues from this that not the least things of creation speak to us of the highest, if we had but eyes to see. Somehow, paradoxically, even a tiny worm, without speech or reason can speak to us of the Eternal Wisdom and Word of God.

In Dionysius's view, we are called not simply to gaze upon or adore the signs of divine Goodness and Beauty that we see in creation. Rather, we are meant to share in it. He sees in the human longing for the Good and Beautiful, in the desire for happiness, a mirror image of the divine yearning for all that is created. For Dionysius Christian life begins with a share in the divine life – divine movement, divine grace is always first -- and our lives consist fundamentally of a movement toward a more full enjoyment of all the life which is manifest to us most clearly

in Christ. This is a very positive view of creation, and of human community and destiny.

But there is also a problem, and that problem shapes this part of the Christian year. The movement we see in creation no more than in our lives is not a straightforward movement from in creation and returning to God in redemption. The account of creation which concludes with the creation of humanity goes on to describe a falling away from God. In some mysterious way the turning away of humankind from our creation in a kind of rebellion in the first paradise was preceded by an earlier turning away in the realm of the created intelligences and will, the realm of the angels, the first light of divine creation. And the same Scriptures which describe the divine longing for humanity, and the human journey toward God also persistently describe the false paths and confusions, and the outright rebellion which has frustrated that journey. The divine yearning for humanity, the love and power of God, and the different kinds of ignorance, weakness, and rebellion that get in the way of God's search for us meet in the cross. There in the Cross we see divine love and human need.

How then are we enabled to make this journey of return, to find what we are looking for, to enjoy what is promised in every offer of divine goodness in the world around us? This is the journey of Lent, the pilgrimage toward the cross where divine goodness and

justice meets human need and conquers human sin. For the divine life to be manifest in us, we need to be transformed. This transformation is first of all God's work, but in the same way that the divine life which is manifest in Christ must also be manifest in us, in some way the divine work which achieves its fulfillment in the cross must also be manifest in us. The disciplines of Lent: fasting, self-denial, prayer, and works of love and kindness, are the human response to the searching love of God.

How do we move from the season of the manifestation of divine life to embrace the struggles and trials necessary for that life to be manifest in us? That is the purpose of these Sundays before Lent. The Orthodox theologian Alexander Schmemmann helps us to see the wisdom of these weeks of preparation: 'the Church knows our inability to change rapidly, to go abruptly from one spiritual or mental state to another. Thus, long before the actual effort of Lent is to begin, the Church calls our attention to its seriousness and invites us to meditate on its significance. Before we can practice Lent we are given its meaning.'

These Sundays before Lent take their names from the numbering of the days before Easter. Lent's first Sunday used to be called Quadragesima, for fortieth, roughly 40 days before Easter. So Septu-, Sexu-, Quinquagesima are roughly 70, 60, 50 days before Easter. This counting emphasizes a change and direction, from

gazing on Nativity and Epiphany, to looking toward the cross and resurrection.

This change of direction is not simply imposed on it, we are invited to see the wisdom of it, and to embrace it. Today, we begin reading the book of Genesis, the account of creation, of humankind's falling from God, and God's initiative in seeking and restoring humankind. This beginning invites us to see God's work in Christ as a second creation, a new creation.

Like the old creation, the new creation begins with divine initiative, and is the work of divine grace, from beginning to end: 'by grace as ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God... For we are his workmanship creation in Christ Jesus'.

And yet this work is not imposed upon us, we are invited into the vineyard to labour.

In the epistle, the world of sport is evoked for us. The Christian life is like a race. We know that athletes train to win. St Paul's analogy puts before us two different elements. The first is the motive: athletes compete for a sort of a crown. The crown which draws the sportsman of today may be a gold medal or a trophy, it may be money or fame. But whatever type of crown it is, it is a fading one. The winner this year will be replaced next year, and

the fans which cheer the sporting hero after a great victory can demand his replacement as soon as things go wrong

But the Christian, says St Paul, competes for a crown whose value never diminishes, -- it is an "incorruptible crown". This crown is nothing less than prize of communion with the living God. We pray not only to see the whole created order as an epiphany of divine goodness and beauty, we pray that we may enjoy these things for ourselves and with one another.

The 2nd part of St Paul's analogy calls us to temperance and discipline. *So run, that ye may obtain. And every man that striveth for the mastery is temperate in all things.*

We know that the best athletes follow gruelling programs which enable them to perform. All such training demands temperance and self-restraint.

If the Christian is to succeed in achieving the incorruptible crown, we will need to undertake a programme. This is very practical – we are not angels, our hopes are not simply translated into action, if our lives are to become epiphany of divine life, we must train so that what we love and how we love is transformed. If we cannot begin there, perhaps we can at least begin with hoping that we may want to best things.

The Gospel for today also calls us to labour.

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.

Like all of Our Lord's miracles, this one is full of mystery, with treasures of wisdom and knowledge waiting to be mined. The man who goes into the vineyard may be simply the Lord God, specifically Christ, or even the apostles. The vineyard appears to be the kingdom of God or more specifically the Church. The different times of the day may describe different periods of life, or even different ages. Some of the Fathers considered that the morning of the word was from Adam to Noah, the third hour from Noah to Abraham, sixth Abraham to Moses, ninth Moses to Incarnation,¹ and only the last hour, the eleventh hour, from our Lord's coming to the end of the world. In that sense, we are all called in the eleventh hour. Another way to read this is that the hours of the day apply to time of life. Those called early in the morning are those who have been introduced into the privileges of the kingdom from infancy, those called at the eleventh hour those who come to Christ only late in life.

Read alongside the epistle, two things stand out. One, is the necessity to labour. Whatever we say about free grace should not be reduced to cheap grace...

¹ Greg, Hom in Evang

2nd, the prize which we seek is not dependent on time served, but on the goodness and generosity of the householder. It is a parable which seems told precisely to provoke us, it seems unfair. The householder offers a penny a day to the labourers, a denarius. This is the normal wage at that time for a day's labour. It is perhaps most clearly an image of our daily bread. The workers who have worked the longest time are offended – 'these last have wrought but one hour, and thou hast made them equal to us which have borne the burden and heat of the day.'

The rebuke of the householder is a message delivered to us – if we are to see the divine goodness and beauty in the world, if we are to see the love and mercy of God which is our destination and our happiness, our expectations will need to be changed. Our labours do not put God under obligation to us, they are not a means of acquiring merit that is all of our own: 'by grace as ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God... For we are his workmanship creation in Christ Jesus'.

But the greater problem, is that we are unable to see how great the reward is. The denarius, the penny, is our daily bread, it is a share in the divine life, and it also the gift of an incorruptible crown. What more could we possibly be given? And yet, somehow, don't we often find the complaints of the labourers on our lips,

demanding our fair share. Gazing on the cross, it's a sobering thought to consider what that fair share would truly be.

Instead, we are invited to receive in gratitude a prize which is beyond our easy imagining.

When I began with Dionysius, told only half the story. While the whole world is an epiphany of divine life, the same works of creation hide God, or may even lead us away from God. God is so completely distinct or different from all that is not God that we often speak most truly when we say what God is not. God is supremely Good, and yet God is not good in the way we understand goodness. The way to God includes not only the way of affirmation, Epiphany, but also the way of negation, Lent. the cross is the sign which speaks precisely by being what it is not. In Lent, we embrace the negative way, a way of struggle and denial which through darkness prepares us to see and embrace the divine light and love. If we are to journey to the life which the death of cross speaks and promises, we too must enter this disorienting darkness, and come to see the labourer's wage as truly a gift beyond speaking.

Almighty God, whose glory the heavens are telling, the earth - thy power - and the sea - thy might- , and whose greatness all feeling and all thinking creatures everywhere herald: To thee belongeth glory, honour, might, greatness, and magnificence, now and for ever, to the ages of ages.

Liturgy of St. James