

*THE COLLECT FOR THE DAY*

*O LORD, WE BESEECH THEE FAVOURABLY TO HEAR THE PRAYERS OF THY PEOPLE; THAT WE, WHO ARE JUSTLY PUNISHED FOR OUR OFFENCES, MAY BE MERCIFULLY DELIVERED BY THY GOODNESS, FOR THE GLORY OF THY NAME; THROUGH JESUS CHRIST OUR SAVIOUR, WHO LIVETH AND, REIGNETH WITH THEE AND THE HOLY GHOST EVER, ONE GOD, WORLD WITHOUT END. AMEN.*

FROM THE WORDS OF ROBERT CROUSE, THEOLOGIAN:

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, ALMOST ALL OUR COLLECTS, EPISTLES AND GOSPELS HAVE CENTERED AROUND ONE THEME: THE EXPECTATION, THE COMING AND MANIFESTATION – THE EPIPHANY – OF GOD, THE SON OF GOD, IN OUR MIDST – THE WORD OF GOD 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. THE FIRST CYCLE IS ABOUT GOD’S COMING AMONG US IN JESUS CHRIST, THE SECOND IS ABOUT HIS WORK WHICH IS GIVEN 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 FOR TODAY SHOULD BE THOUGHT ABOUT IN THAT CONTEXT. PERHAPS IT WILL OPEN OUR HEARTS IF WE THINK FIRST ABOUT THE HISTORY OF THE SELECTION OF THESE PARTICULAR LESSONS. THE “LECTIONARY”, AS IT’S CALLED, THE SELECTION OF LESSONS WE READ SUNDAY BY SUNDAY – IS ACTUALLY VERY ANCIENT. IN THE FORM IN WHICH WE HAVE IT IN THE PRAYER BOOK, IT GOES BACK, WITH VERY FEW ALTERATIONS, WELL OVER HUNDREDS OF YEARS.

WE STILL USE THE COMMON LECTIONARY, AND THERE ARE SOME THINGS TO BE LEARNED FROM THINKING ABOUT ITS HISTORY AND ITS RATIONALE WHICH SEEM TO AT TIMES HAVE BEEN SOMEWHAT FORGOTTEN. FOR INSTANCE, ONE MIGHT RECALL THAT AT ONE TIME IN THE EARLY DAYS OF THE CHURCH, SEPTUAGESIMA WAS THE BEGINNING OF LENT, THE DAY ON WHICH CATECHUMENS – NEW CONVERTS TO CHRISTIANITY – WERE FIRST IN CHURCH TO BEGIN THEIR PREPARATION FOR EASTER. THINK WHAT TODAY’S LESSONS MUST HAVE MEANT FOR THEM.

SEPTUAGESIMA IS THE NAME FOR THE NINTH SUNDAY BEFORE EASTER AND FOR THE THIRD SUNDAY BEFORE ASH WEDNESDAY. THE TERM COMES FROM THE LATIN WORD FOR SEVENTIETH BECAUSE IT FALLS WITHIN SEVENTY DAYS BEFORE EASTER AND THE SUNDAY RECALLS THE RESURRECTION OF CHRIST. BY MANY THEY ARE CONSIDERED “LITTLE EASTER.” THE SEVENTEEN DAY PERIOD BEGINNING ON THIS DAY WAS TO BE OBSERVED AS A PREPARATION FOR THE SEASON OF LENT.

I WAS TAKEN BY THIS PART OF TODAY’S EPISTLE IN RELATION TO OUR FAITH: “KNOW YE NOT THAT THEY WHICH RUN IN A RACE RUN ALL, BUT ONE RECEIVETH THE PRIZE; SO RUN, THAT YE MAY OBTAIN.”

FROM ST. PAUL’S FIRST EPISTLE TO THE CORINTHIANS, THEY WERE REMINDED OF THE DISCIPLINE WHICH A CHRISTIAN LIFE REQUIRES. CHRISTIAN LIFE IS A LIFE OF DISCIPLINE – DISCIPLINE OF MIND, DISCIPLINE OF HEART, DISCIPLINE OF WILL. WE MUST SHAPE OUR LIVES IN WAYS CONSISTENT WITH OUR FAITH: IN HUMILITY, IN THANKFULNESS, IN CHARITY, IN TEMPERANCE, AND SO ON; MINDFUL OF OUR GOAL. WE MUST CONCENTRATE IN OUR TASK – THAT IS WHAT THE DISCIPLINE OF LENT IS ABOUT.

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 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 OUR LORD’S OWN, WON BY HIM IN THE SAVING WORK OF JESUS CHRIST, AND IT IS OURS ONLY BY FAITH IN HIM.

IT SEEMS TO ME THAT NOTHING COULD BE MORE RELEVANT THAN THESE TWO POINTS – OUR DISCIPLINE AND GOD’S FREE GIFT OF SALVATION – AS WE PREPARE OURSELVES FOR LENT. WHAT DO OUR LESSONS HAVE TO SAY ABOUT THAT? FIRST, THE POINT ABOUT DISCIPLINE, THE EPISTLE LESSON, THE DISCIPLINE OF MIND AND HEART AND WILL. THAT IS TO SAY, NO GREED, OR LUST, OR ENVY, OR PRIDE, OR BIGOTRY. WE ARE CALLED TO SHAPE OUR OWN LIVES IN THE WAYS OF CHARITY AND JUSTICE, AND, SO FAR AS WE ARE ABLE, TO SHARE THE LIVES OF OTHERS, IN AND WITH OUR OWN FAMILIES, AND PARISHES, AND COMMUNITIES.

TODAY’S EPISTLE, WITH THE THOUGHTS OF WILLIAM BARKLEY, POINT OUT SOME OF OUR LIFE’S DIFFICULTIES. ST. PAUL SHARED THAT LIFE CAN BE A STRUGGLE. ALL OF US HAVE EXPERIENCED THOSE THINGS. AMERICAN PHILOSOPHER WILLIAM JAMES CAPTURES THE DIFFICULTIES OF LIFE IN THESE WORDS, “IF THIS LIFE IS PARTLY A REAL FIGHT, IN WHICH SOMETHING IS ETERNALLY GAINED BY PRAYER, IT IS BETTER THAN A GAME FROM WHICH ONE CAN WITHDRAW AT WILL.” WE MUST REGARD OURSELVES AS BEING ENGAGED

UPON AN UPHILL BATTLE TO PRESS TOWARDS THE GOAL OF GROWING OUR LIVES INTO THE FAITH.

TO SUCCESSFULLY GROW, THE BATTLE REQUIRES DISCIPLINE. IF WE ARE GOING TO DO OUR BEST WORK IN ANY ASPECT OF LIFE, WE MUST BRING TO IT MINDS THAT ARE AS FIT AS WE CAN MAKE THEM. WE HAVE TO DISCIPLINE OUR MINDS. WE MUST DISCIPLINE OUR SOULS; WE CAN DO SO BY FACING LIFE'S SORROWS WITH CALM ENDURANCE, ITS TEMPTATIONS WITH THE STRENGTH GOD GIVES US AND THEN COURAGE TO CONQUER OUR DISAPPOINTMENTS.

WE NEED TO KNOW OUR GOAL. A DISTRESSING THING IS THE AIMLESSNESS OF THE LIVES OF THOSE WHO ARE DRIFTING ANYWHERE INSTEAD OF GOING SOMEWHERE. THE DUTCH NOVELIST MAARTEN MAARTENS HAS A PARABLE: 'THERE WAS A MAN ONCE, A SATIRIST. IN THE NATURAL COURSE OF TIME HIS FRIENDS SLEW HIM. AND THE PEOPLE CAME AND STOOD ROUND ABOUT HIS CORPSE. "HE TREATED THE WHOLE ROUND WORLD AS HIS FOOTBALL," THEY SAID INDIGNANTLY, "AND HE KICKED IT." THE MAN OPENED ONE EYE. "BUT," HE SAID, "I ALWAYS KICKED TOWARDS THE GOAL." ' TO GO JUST ANYWHERE IS THE CERTAIN WAY TO ARRIVE NOWHERE. WE NEED TO KNOW THE WORTH OF OUR GOAL.

WHAT THEN IS OUR GOAL? ONCE WE HAVE ESTABLISHED IT WE NEED TO KNOW THE WORTH OF OUR GOAL. SURELY THE FAITH GROWING IN OUR LIVES IS AN INCREDIBLY WORTHWHILE GOAL. JESUS SAID, "LOOK WHAT YOU ARE MISSING IF YOU DON'T FOLLOW MY WAY."

WE MUST TAKE CONTROL OF OURSELVES. THE GREEKS DECLARED THAT THE FIRST RULE OF LIFE IS TO “KNOW THYSELF.” WE CANNOT CONTRIBUTE TO THOSE IN NEED UNLESS WE HAVE TAKEN CARE OF OURSELVES: WE CANNOT TEACH WHAT WE DO NOT KNOW. WE CANNOT BRING OTHERS TO CHRIST UNTIL WE HAVE FOUND HIM.

BUT WHAT GOD HAS ASKED US IS SIMPLE AND YET PROFOUND; “RUN THE RACE” TO OBTAIN THE FAITH. PAUL REMINDS US THAT WORKING TOGETHER AS A TEAM, YOU AND I CAN WIN THE PRIZE OF FAITH.