

Septuagesima Sunday 2022

“The last shall be first, and the first last”. (St. Matthew 20. 16)

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

In this morning’s Epistle, St. Paul speaks of running in a race in order to win a “corruptible crown”. He is referring to real events that were part of a competition in ancient Greece called the Isthmian Games. They were called the Isthmian Games because they were held on an isthmus – a narrow strip of land -- not far from the city of Corinth. And, since he was writing to the Church in Corinth in today’s Epistle, he used that image. He said, “Know ye not that they which run in a race all run, but (only) one runner receives the prize?...They do it to obtain a corruptible crown, but we an incorruptible”. The corruptible crown was exactly that – a wreath made of celery (and later, pine) that sat on the winner’s head.

Those wreaths were a far cry from the gold medals presented at the Olympics today. But Paul would also have referred to them as “corruptible” because he had in mind the crown of everlasting life. The race he was thinking about was not the track on the Isthmus, but the race of life. And his point to the Corinthian Church was to run it – to live -- as though they were athletes in training. “I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified.”

Well here we are at Septuagesima Sunday – 70 days before Easter – and that is the message: bring the body into line with the soul. Check and limit the desires of the flesh. Exercise self-control. Of course, we have heard that before; however, it is a message that needs to be understood in the light of this morning’s Gospel. So, let’s go to it now and come back to this ‘discipline’ point later.

Today’s Gospel is one of the hardest to understand because it goes against everything that our culture says and teaches about fairness. How can it be fair that those who work for twelve hours receive the same pay as those who work for one hour? And yet, the twelve-hour workers received the amount they agreed to work for. So they were not cheated. But what seems unfair to us is that those who worked less, received more than they should have – much, much more. However, as the owner told the twelve-hour workers when they complained: “Is it not lawful for me to do what I will with my own? Is your eye evil because I am good?” In other words, it’s my money and I am being generous with it. I paid you what we agreed on; so what’s the problem?

Here’s a question: we naturally tend to see ourselves as those who worked the twelve hour shift. But what if we are the eleventh hour workers? What if we are the labourers who work only one hour? Does the owner’s generosity seem unfair then? If that was the case, what could we say except that we received more than we deserved. That is a key point – one for the bathroom mirror: as mere mortals and miserable sinners, we have received more than we deserve from God. That’s the message in today’s Collect on page 132:

O Lord, we beseech Thee favourably to hear the prayers of thy people; (here it comes) that we, who are justly punished for our offences, may be mercifully delivered by thy goodness, for the glory of the Name."

As go the principles of law, we deserve to be punished for all the times we have offended the Lord: for my selfish and greedy actions; for all the times I have ignored the Lord's voice; for my spiritual lukewarmness; for my lack of faith; for all of my fits of anger and bad language; for all of my whining and complaining; for the lack of love in my heart. According to the law, I deserve to be punished for these and all of my other sins. However, instead of doing that – instead of writing me off and condemning me to hell, God sent His only-begotten Son to be the propitiation – the perfect Sacrifice and Remedy -- for my sinfulness. Mercifully, instead of the letter of the law, the Lord has dealt with me by grace. He did not give me what I deserved. No. He gave me infinitely more: forgiveness, healing, peace and everlasting life.

And what is my response? That's the question. What can I do to express my gratitude for this incredible gift of grace? The answer takes us back to the Epistle: run the race to win the crown. Don't be a Sunday Christian. Commit your life to the One Who has saved you, and really begin to pray 'Thy will be done'. Let your gratitude be manifested in loyalty and obedience to God and His Word. And let us keep our bodies and souls together with self-control. As St. Paul said last week, "Let the Word of Christ dwell in you richly – abundantly."

There is something else. We all can and should express our gratitude for God's amazing grace and Christ's Sacrifice on the Cross, by the way we deal with each other. We have received infinitely more than we deserve; therefore, as St. Paul told the Colossians, be patient with one another and forgive one another, even as the Lord forgave you. "And," he told them "put on charity, which is the bond of perfectness". The Love of Christ is to be the hallmark of our common life. It is to be the inspiration and the rule as we worship together, believing together we have all received infinitely more than we deserve.

A closing story about Fiorello LaGuardia, a lawyer by trade, but best known as the mayor of New York City from 1934-1945. He was a practising Episcopalian (Anglican) and is considered one of the greatest mayors in American history. LaGuardia Airport is named in his honor.

Anyway, one winter's night in 1935, Fiorello showed up at a night court in the poorest ward of the city. He dismissed the judge for the evening and took over the bench. That night a tattered woman, charged with stealing a loaf of bread, was brought before him. She defended herself by saying, "My daughter's husband has deserted her. She is sick, and her children are starving."

Nevertheless, the shopkeeper refused to drop the charges, saying, "It's a bad neighborhood, your honor, and she's got to be punished to teach other people a lesson."

LaGuardia sighed. He turned to the woman and said, "I've got to punish you; the law makes no exceptions. Ten dollars or ten days in jail." However, even while pronouncing sentence, LaGuardia reached into his pocket, took out a ten-dollar bill, and threw it into his hat with these

famous words: "Here's the ten-dollar fine, which I now remit, and furthermore, I'm going to fine everyone in this courtroom fifty cents for living in a town where a person has to steal bread so that her grandchildren can eat. Mr. Bailiff, collect the fines and give them to the defendant."

The following day, a New York newspaper reported: "Forty-seven dollars and fifty cents was turned over to a bewildered old grandmother who had stolen a loaf of bread to feed her starving grandchildren. Among those making forced donations were a red-faced storekeeper, seventy petty criminals, and a few New York policemen."

Sometimes we get what we don't deserve. That grandmother, by the letter of the law, deserved punishment. But she didn't get it. She deserved justice, but she got mercy. She deserved the full weight of the law, but received grace. She deserved a stay in the city jail, but she got to go back home. She deserved the accompaniment of criminals, but she found her self in the presence of her family.

It is easy in this age of self-sufficiency to forget how needy and sinful we are at the core of our being. And, it is easy to forget the price of His precious Blood that Jesus paid to rescue us. The truth is, we have received infinitely more than we deserve. As the psalmist reminds us, God "has not dealt with us according to our sins, nor punished us according to our iniquities" (Ps. 103:10). We should be counted among the last – the least deserving of Heaven, if even at all. But, in Christ, we are among the first, and He has promised an incorruptible crown. "Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee the crown of life." (Revelation 2.10)

And now unto God Almighty, the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost be ascribed all might, majesty, dominion, honour and glory, as is most justly due, henceforth and forevermore. Amen.