

Septuagesima Sunday 2023

“So the last shall be first, and the first last: for many be called, but few chosen.” (St. Matthew 20.16)

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

One of the National Hockey League teams, the Philadelphia Flyers, has a native of Prince Edward Island as one of its players. The young man's name is Zack MacEwan. He is rugged winger who stands at 6'3" and weighs 205 lbs. Born in Charlottetown, he played for the Amherst Ramblers of the Maritime Junior Hockey League before becoming a member of the Moncton Wildcats in 2014. He signed with the Vancouver Canucks in 2017 and became a member of Philadelphia in 2021.

Last Fall he signed a one year, one-way contract with the Flyers for 925,00 dollars. As part of this deal, it was agreed that he would be subject to waivers if he did not earn an opening-night spot with the team. That meant, that his contract could be picked up by another team, and he would have to leave Philadelphia. Although MacEwan was not in Philadelphia's opening-game line-up he was not placed on waivers; and, by the team's third game of the season (on October 18th) he earned a starting forward position.

Recently, Zach MacEwan got his jaw fractured in a game against the Minnesota Wild. However, as part of his contract, Zach MacEwan will receive his full pay while he recovers over the next five weeks.

All of this is presented as an example of how contracts work. We all are familiar with such arrangements. We apply for a position, believing that we possess certain qualifications and skills; then, we may receive an offer with certain conditions, including a job description, salary details, working hours, vacation time and other time off. Contracts are an agreement between an employer and an employee: a certain amount of work is performed for a certain amount of money. A contract is signed and witnessed as a reference point in the working relationship, and as a way of protecting both parties in the event of an unforeseen circumstance. For us, in this business-focused world, contracts are normal. They are part of our every-day life and they impact the way we think about our relationships.

And that is why the parable in this morning's Gospel is difficult to understand. The Lord Jesus is the storyteller and He was speaking about the Kingdom of Heaven. So this parable must given our undivided attention, even when we hear this last part of the story:

When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, 'Call the laborers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last, up to the first.' And when those hired about the eleventh hour came, each of them received a penny. Now when those hired first came, they thought they would receive more, but each of them also received a penny.

No matter how we may figure this, there is no way to make sense of it in contractual terms. On the one hand, those who worked all day in the heat, received exactly what they agreed to work for: one penny. On the other hand, those who only worked for an hour received the same amount – a penny. How is that

possible – and how is it fair? That was the question and the complaint of those all-day workers to the owner.

The owner's answer (which was Jesus' answer) went beyond the original agreement. It acknowledged the contract but was not limited to it. His answer revealed that God's Way of relating to humans is not contractual but rather gracious, merciful -- generous. Let's look at it together – at the bottom of page 134. In the English Standard Version, it is translated like this:

But he replied to one of them, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what belongs to you and go. I choose to give to this last worker as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?' So the last will be first, and the first last."

The last shall be first and the first last. Regardless of whether we have served the Lord and His Church for eighty years or twenty-five years, He offers us the same merciful gift of salvation and forgiveness through His Sacrifice on the Cross. Although when we accept and embrace the Lord Jesus as our Sin-Bearer we immediately want to offer Him our hearts and our time and energy, we do so hoping that others will receive the Good News and open their hearts to Him as well. We do not try to keep the Hope of Christ as secret; we share it! This means that others will always be coming to faith after us – like the thief on the Cross.

Does this ring a bell for you? Does anyone come to mind when you hear this? Perhaps you are thinking about the person (or persons) who shared the Good News of what God has done for us through His Son. If so, they would be like one of those workers who were hired early and bore the heat of the day. It is important to note that when Jesus sent out the twelve apostles to proclaim that the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand, He told them: "Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, cast out demons. Freely, freely you have received; freely, freely give." (St. Matthew 10.8) God's grace offers us infinitely more than we deserve through the Lord Jesus Christ. Thankfully His love for us is not contractual.

And that's a key message on this Septuagesima Sunday – approximately 70 days before Easter. Today, the Church points us to the Cross and to asks us to consider what the Cross is all about. This morning's Gospel clearly reminds us that this incredible Sacrifice – this amazing Grace – is not something we deserve. It is not something we can earn. The precious Blood of Christ shed for us is God's gift to us miserable sinners. As St. Paul told the Church in Rome, "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith." (3.23)

So, what does it mean to follow Jesus Who gave Himself to be nailed to the Cross? It means that we are called to love God and to love each other without limits and beyond the terms of contracts. Jesus said, "The first and great commandment is to love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength; and the second is

like unto it: love your neighbour as yourself.” As the children of God, we are to be different and to live differently from the ways of the world.

In order to do this we must be disciplined; and that’s the point of today’s Epistle. Writing to the Christians in the city of Corinth, not far from where the ancient world held the Isthmian Games (similar to the Olympics) St. Paul used the example of an athlete. “I keep under my body and bring it into subjection, lest that by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be a castaway.”

In order to follow the Lord Jesus Christ we must be disciplined. We must bring the desires of our flesh under the control of the Holy Spirit. We must be obedient to the Word of God as revealed in Holy Scripture. For this to happen we must read, mark and inwardly digest the Word daily. We must stay close to the Church and whenever possible receive the Holy Communion of Christ’s Body and Blood. We must have a time each day for quiet and prayer; and we must look for the fellowship of other Christians. The spiritual tools of abstinence and fasting and self-examination are also important. The thing is, Jesus says that in order to find Him and to experience His new life – His truth and happiness – we must deny ourselves and take up our cross and follow Him. This means leaving or repenting from the ways of the world; and that requires discipline. It requires sacrifice; it calls for our best effort every day.

For many that is just too much to ask. As modern people we have been conditioned to want instant gratification – immediate satisfaction. We want everything defined. We want the assurances of a contract. And as long as we are getting what we want, all is fine and dandy. But what happens when someone like Zach MacEwen gets too old to play? What happens if he doesn’t make the team?

Thankfully for us, those questions have been covered by God’s Divine Justice. Through Christ Jesus, His beloved Son, He offers us a position in His Kingdom which is more than we deserve and infinitely more than we can ask or imagine.

And now unto God Almighty: the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost...