

LIVING THE GOSPEL
A Sermon for Septuagesima, 2011
On the Text: Propers for the Day
By the Reverend Doctor Randolph Constantine

Today is the first day of a new season on the church calendar, a season that has the prosaic name of Pre-Lent. I prefer to call it the “Gesimas” because it is a short season of three Sundays with the name of each of them ending in “gesima”. This little season is only 17 days long. It always begins on a Sunday, has three Sundays, and ends on Shrove Tuesday. The Gesima season is a sort of odd one in that the color for the season is **PURPLE**, which indicates penitence; but on the calendar I gave many of you, none of the days of it are designated as days of fasting. That changes in Lent. In a way then, we can think of this pre-Lenten season of the Gesimas as a slightly less rigorous preparation for the more rigorous discipline of Lent, like walking before you start to run, running a mile before you start to try running 10 miles or a marathon. However, the Gospel lessons for the three Gesima Sundays contain messages that we need to hear, messages that we often overlook.

On Friday, I received a pastoral letter from Bishop Grote which included some material about the Church calendar and our time between now and Easter. In that letter he said this about Septuagesima, “On this Sunday, we are *invited* to work in the Lord’s Kingdom.” Now I can guess that some of you are mentally shaking your heads and asking, much in the way that Satan asked Eve, “Did God really say that?” Did the Gospel lesson really say that? Do you mean that when we get to heaven we might have to work? That we don’t get to lie back on a cloud and just eat heavenly bon-bons all day without ever getting fat? Actually, I don’t think anybody currently living on this earth really knows what life will be like in heaven, whether we will work or not, or what we shall do, or whether there will really be such things as heavenly bon-bons. Where we work is here on earth, and the work we have to do is really hard. After all, the church is an outpost of God’s Kingdom here on Earth.

And as Christians what is our work here on earth? Actually, many things. We could begin a long list with: Feeding the Hungry, Clothing the Naked, Lifting up the poor, Visiting Prisoners, Visiting the Sick, Worshiping God, Praying for all who are in trouble, sorrow, need, sickness, or any other adversity, and praying to become better Christians, which is part of what the penitential seasons are all about. Ut oh, I left out one of the most important, Jesus’ last commandment to His disciples: to be evangelists, to preach the Gospel to all nations and make them disciples of Jesus Christ. And there are others as well. Will we ever get it all done? On this earth, not likely.

There are three things I want us to look at and bring together: The meaning of today’s Gospel lesson; The meaning of penitence and why we have penitential seasons; and The work we have before us as a church. When we put these together, we find out what the Gospel means for us, and how we live, or rather, how we should live.

Our Gospel lesson is a parable about a householder, a person who holds, or owns a house. The householder also has a vineyard. The text begins by saying: Matthew 20:1 **"For the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard.** The householder is the master of a house and it is *his* vineyard. He is a rich and powerful man. He goes out at dawn to hire laborers to work in his vineyard. He hires them at the standard wage for a day's work for a day laborer in that day and time – one denarius, a Roman coin at the time that was about equal to the Greek Drachma. Denarius is the word that the King James version translated as a Penny. The Master keeps going out every three hours and keeps hiring more laborers; but after the first batch, He just says He will pay them what is right. The Jewish day started at 6:00 in the morning, so the third hour was 9:00, the sixth hour was noon, the ninth hour was 3:00 in the afternoon. The workday would end at 6:00 PM which would be the twelfth hour. But what does the Master do? He has some work in that vineyard that He wants done that day and no later, so He goes out at the 11th hour, 5:00 in the afternoon, and hires even more laborers, just for one hour's work. We are not told what season of the year this was, but William Barclay says that at harvest time near the end of September when the grapes ripened, it was a race to get the full harvest completed before the rains came and ruined the crop, so this was a reasonable scenario of the grape harvest there in those days.

When the work day was over, the ones he hired at 5:00 got paid first and they got a full denarius. When the guys who had been hired at 0600 in the morning and who had worked all day, they thought, "He paid those guys who only worked one hour a full denarius, he had better pay us more." They argue with the Master's steward: "We worked a full 12 hours; we worked through the heat of the day; and we carried the biggest loads. We should get more than just one denarius." The Master is not convinced. He says: Matthew 20:13-15 **'Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? 14 Take what belongs to you and go. I choose to give to this last worker as I give to you. 15 Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?'**

There are a couple of translation problems that have to be mentioned here. For one the King James is more correct than the ESV, where it says, Matthew 20:15 **Is thine eye evil, because I am good?** where the ESV says **Or do you begrudge my generosity?'**. The phrase, **"Is thine eye evil,"** was an idiom for **Are you envious?**

How do we, or should we, interpret this parable? As a first principle when reading Jesus' parables in the Bible, whenever He tells a story about a Master in relation to His servants, or employees, dinner guests or even friends, see if the story makes sense if we think of the Master as God. How is this like the Kingdom of Heaven? John Lange in his commentary explains that those hired at different hours are those who came to faith in Jesus at different times in their life, or at different times in history. The payment, the wages of faith, is eternal life, the opposite of the wages of sin; and the reward is the same for all who keep the faith.

That final statement, Matthew 20:16 **"16 So the last shall be first, and the first last: for many be called, but few chosen."** gives some problems because it is not in what are considered to be the earliest and best manuscripts. This relates to the men who were still in the market place a

the later hours. They had not been hired by anyone else, but as Barclay says, the Master in His mercy hired them out of compassion, and they worked for what the Master said in Matthew 20:7 “and whatsoever is right, that shall ye receive.” What they received was from the generosity of God. Barclay continues with this: “All God gives us is of grace. We cannot earn what he gives us; we cannot deserve it; what God gives us is given out of the goodness of His heart; what God gives is not pay; but a gift; not a reward, but a grace.” We’ll come back to this in a few minutes.

Advent, the Gesimas, and Lent are *Penitential seasons*, but what does that mean? In fact, let’s ask a harder question: What is the meaning of *Penitence*? After looking through a bunch of dictionaries, I can find only hints of what I think it means. Most dictionaries just say, or imply that it is a synonym for repentance. One theological dictionary says that in so many words but warns against confusing penitence with the Catholic sacrament of Penance, of doing a prescribed set of punishments for some sin. I think that Penitence is an attitude, almost a way of life. It is an attitude that combines contrition and repentance with humility. St. Augustine of Hippo used the Latin word *humilitas* when he was writing about penitence. Contrition is feeling sorry for what you did in sinning, but if that is all you have done, you have not repented. To repent is to turn away from that sin, to actively try to never commit that sin again. The Greek word for the verb to repent is. **μετανοέω**, which means to change your mind. You sinned because you thought it was a good idea at the time, but you haven’t really repented until you have decided that it is never a good idea at any time. Penitence, to me, is the attitude that comes from the mixing of contrition and repentance with humility. The Penitential seasons are those two seasons of Advent and Lent in which we contemplate with penitence the two great events in the life of Jesus Christ: His Birth and His Crucifixion and Resurrection, times in which we purify ourselves in an attempt to be worthy to celebrate the commemoration of those events.

Penitence changes us. It is supposed to. It is like that famous statement that everybody quotes from Dietrich Bonnhöffer, “When Christ calls a man, He bids him come and die.” Bonnhöffer is not saying that to answer Christ’s call is to lie down and cease living; he is saying one must die to his old life of sin and begin living the new life of Christ. As St. Paul put it in Colossians 3:9-10 **9 Lie not one to another, seeing that ye have put off the old man with his deeds; 10 And have put on the new man, which is renewed in knowledge after the image of him that created him:**

This is what everybody finds hard to do. It is very hard to live in this world with all its lures and distractions and at the same time live a Christian life. I read a lot this past week, some of it about The Episcopal Church because we can never stop hoping and praying that they will cast off the works of darkness. TEC makes much about being the inclusive church. Their problem is that they have come to decide that some things that the church has known were sins for almost 2000 years are now celebrated by TEC as acceptable lifestyles. I cannot remember who said this, but one person in responding to some of this talk of inclusivity said this: **We are inclusive in my church too. You can come as you are; but after a while, we expect you to change.** This is an important part of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, that we are to die to sin, and you can’t do that unless you change and change radically from the inborn sinful nature of all

mankind. There is a wonderful book by Jerry Bridges called *Respectable Sins*. In it he talks about all sorts of sins that are now considered to be acceptable behavior by large sections of society. I hope to someday preach from it if I can tear myself away from the Propers. That book is a shocker and will show how hard it is to “put off the old” Unfortunately, putting off the old is what we have to do if we want to follow Jesus and live the way He would have us live, that is, to do what I think of as Living the Gospel, not living into the Gospel or living out the Gospel. This is like the difference between Abraham believing God and Abraham believing in God, and the Bible says in Genesis 15:6 about Abram: **6 And he believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness.** He didn’t just believe in God; he believed what God said.

We must learn to live the Gospel. We know we can never be perfect at it, not on this earth; but we must try, for that is what Christ calls us to do. Our work here is work in the Lord’s vineyard, and it is about the growth of His kingdom. Our payment is not in earthly wages. To count on that sort of payment from God is to look at the wrong side of the ledger. William Barclay says, “We are not Christians if our first concern is pay.” Those who came first to the vineyard left with the amount they had contracted to receive. To those who came later than the first crew, the Master said, **Matthew 20:4 'You go into the vineyard too, and whatever is right I will give you.'** They went willingly, and received more than they expected.

We are invited by God to work in His kingdom, in His vineyard. We all have different gifts and talents. Bring them to Him. Ask not what the wages will be. Live His Gospel and receive His Grace. As our opening hymn said, “Come labor on, who dares stand idle on the harvest plain.” For the kingdom of God, Come labor on, the harvest waits. AMEN.