

## Sermon Notes for Septuagesima

*the burden and heat of the day (gospel)*

Anciently, and therefore in the Church of England, the readings in the daily office start again today from the beginning of Genesis. So it makes sense to preach on creation and the following Sunday on the fall. However, the readings for Holy Communion do not closely relate to these topics.

I suppose the point of the gospel parable is that God has only one gift for us, himself. And that gift does not admit of more or less in the giver. Others will get into heaven (life with God) with far less effort than (we think) we have exerted. Is this unfair in God? Rather it is jealousy in us. And if we persist in such thinking, we will end up in that particular form of hell which is heaven rejected.

This parable is not discussing the question whether anybody deserves heaven. Or at least, only to the extent that the owner's action extends from justice into generosity. The teaching of Jesus is not concerned to deny the possibility of "just persons who need no repentance", but it is good news because it offers hope to everybody else. It is always possible to repent, and life with God is his gift – it does not have to be earned. Or to be nearer to the terms of the parable, God will accept and reward minimal effort as if it were lifelong dedication. The early Church had to face tensions between those who had been observant Jews from their youth and those who had received the good news of repentance. That puts the parable into the same area of concern as the prodigal son. In both cases, the "virtuous" do not have any special reward – at most, good words. (In neither case is the gentile mission an issue.) I presume that this is a part of Jesus' teaching which if found difficult still had to be preserved. And is rightly preserved because it will never cease to be important. The temptation to reduce religion to moral actions and their "appropriate" rewards will never go away.

Does that mean that conduct does not matter? That is the extreme version of Calvinism. But it is not the New Testament. Whenever Paul finds immorality in his churches, his anger is obvious. The Jewish law may not be of obligation, but right conduct is. So we can bring the epistle into consideration. I doubt Paul would have seen any games, because they were inherently acts of pagan religion. To be present would have been to accept the validity of the sacrifices offered. It may be that he is simply using standard rhetorical cliches, which were increasingly dated as many games had come to offer cash prizes rather than "corruptible crowns". To identify rhetoric is not to invalidate. The meaning is clear: Christian living involves effort. But, we may say, effort in strange games in which "all have won and all must have prizes". Or at least all can win, for God "wishes all men to be saved". There is no competition with other people; that would be another form of the mistake challenged in the gospel. We compete, it may be, or rather measure ourselves against, an impossible standard. For the only standard available to us is Christ.

Paul does not say that the body is bad, or to be punished. An athlete does not seek to destroy his body, but to make the best of it. Discipline is not rejection. We are to be saved with our bodies. That said, the athlete is distorting his body in some ways; and fallen nature may indeed have to be distorted in turn for us to experience "O how glorious and resplendent, fragile body, shalt thou be".

Paul does acknowledge even for himself the risk of being a castaway. Preaching is rightly about the way of salvation; but "backsliding" is possible. Two readings then which seem to coincide in this, that Christian living is to be understood as labour, as hard work (even if the reward far exceeds the effort). Of course, this is not the whole gospel. We are not on our own in the effort. We have to help us a higher gift than grace: "God's presence and his very self, and essence all-divine." That gift is renewed here. (There is the potential danger of unworthy receiving and purchasing to oneself damnation, but never forget that God's purpose in this sacrament is to help us – any good purpose on our part will receive a reward far richer than it can deserve.)

From John Mason Neale "Hymns of the Eastern Church" based on St. Joseph of the Studium and part of the Orthodox office for this Sunday:

The prize, the prize secure  
The athlete nearly fell;  
Bare all he could endure  
And bare not always well:  
But he may smile at troubles gone  
Who sets the victor-garland on.