

Sermon Notes for Septuagesima

“Man goeth forth unto his work and to his labour until the evening.” Ps. 104.23.

This Sunday starts the preparation for Lent by recalling first principles; the first lesson at Morning Prayer is Genesis 1. So what does creation imply? I am using some ideas (and many words) from a famous (Anglican) sermon by Newman.

We are sent here to do a work, for God's work in the creation of the world is the archetype of all works which His creatures are able to do through His grace unto His glory. Adam, was in Eden, “to dress it and to keep it.” Soon, alas, did he fall, and become subject to heavier toil, the earth being cursed for his sake, and bringing forth unto him thorns and thistles. God, however, in His mercy, did not desert him; and, accordingly, we read in the Gospel of the householder going out “to hire labourers into His vineyard.” Such were His dealings with the race of man till the fulness of time was come, and in the last days, He sent His Son to gather together labourers for His work from all parts of the earth. From today's Epistle we may at least learn that Christianity is not without effort.

There is always a hazard that the truth of free salvation will be extended to grace without consequences. St. Paul was very clear – if you won't work, don't eat (2 Thes. 3.10). No, the Gospel gives grace in order that it might enjoin a work. We must have grace before we work, in order to work; but as surely as grace is conferred on us, so surely is a work enjoined. The Gospel does not abrogate works, but provides for them. And therefore, in the prayer-book catechism, the duty to our neighbour is understood as including “to learn and labour truly to get mine own living”. I make no comment on secular disputes, but *Christianity* does assume that those who can work should do so (and there are very many forms of work, much more than just paid employment).

Newman describes the work of a Christian as: “doing justly, loving mercy, walking humbly with our God”; denying our wills, ruling our tongues, softening and sweetening our tempers, mortifying our lusts; learning patience, meekness, purity, forgiveness of injuries, and continuance in well-doing.

Newman notices a strange reading of the parable, that Christians are those called at the eleventh hour and so have little work to do. The modern (perhaps now dated, as with “modern art”) response is to say that the parable is *solely* about God's pure generosity; if Christians get off lightly compared to Jews, that is God's choice and no injustice has been done. But still, Newman rightly insists, it is all about work; less in quantity, less uncomfortable, but still work. Maybe the *point* of the parable isn't work; still the Lord has chosen to use the image of work, and surely because it is appropriate to his followers' lives.

Do you wish to see how little the Christian is saved from toil by his being saved from “the burden and heat of the day”? Consider the Epistle and the chapter of which it is part. St. Paul speaks of himself and his brother labourers in the vineyard; and from this instance you will be able to decide how little Christ has saved those whom He loves from toil and trouble. Christ, we know, is the second Adam, and has restored us to a better paradise. Yet compare the state of Adam in the second chapter of Genesis with that of St. Paul in the ninth chapter of his first Epistle to the Corinthians, and it will be plain that our blessedness under the Gospel is not the removal of labour, but the gift of strength; that the original paradise is not yet restored to us with its repose and security, and that our duties still are not those of Adam innocent, but of Adam fallen.

If Christians are those called at the eleventh hour, this means the world's evening, not our own. By the eleventh hour is not meant that Christians have little to do, but that the time is short; that it is the last time; that there is a “present distress”; that they have much to do in a little time; that “the night cometh when no man can work”; that their Lord is at hand.

We are not sent into this world to stand all the day idle, but to go forth to our work and to our labour until the evening! *Until* the evening, not *in* the evening only of life, but serving God from our youth, and not waiting till our years fail us. Let us “give glory to the Lord our God, before He cause darkness, and before our feet stumble upon the dark mountains”; (Jer. 13.16.) and, having turned to Him, let us see that our goodness be not “as the morning cloud, and as the early dew which passeth away”. The *end* is the proof of the matter. There is a judgement to come, when “Each man's work shall be made manifest; for the day shall declare it, because it is revealed in fire; and the fire itself shall prove each man's work of what sort it is” (1 Cor. 3.13).

The readings are those of the Sunday in the Prayer Book