

## Septuagesima, 28<sup>th</sup> January 2018

It seems as if Lent has come early: no Gloria at Mass and no more singing of Alleluia (which we could have literally buried yesterday evening, ready to be resurrected at Easter). Yes, we have entered the pre-Lenten season of Septuagesima (referring to the ‘seventieth’ day before Easter), a foretaste as such of Quadragesima, namely the forty days of Lent itself; indeed reflected in these violet vestments.

The Church does not, however, expect us to start immediately with our Lenten penances. In fact, in some countries Septuagesima Sunday marks the start of the carnival season! Having said this, mortification is clearly mentioned in today’s Epistle: “I chastise my body, and bring it into subjection” (1 Co 9:27a), St Paul reports to the Corinthians. And why does he do this? – “lest perhaps, when I have preached to others, I myself should become a castaway” (1 Co 9:27b). Obviously there needs to be some self-discipline in the Christian life, like that which an athlete imposes upon himself, and of course the Apostle makes the analogy of running like an athlete in a race: “Know you not that they that run in the race, all run indeed, but one receiveth the prize? So run that you may obtain” (1 Co 9:24).

A certain amount of self-discipline helps our level of fitness as we run. Yet where in the long run (if you forgive the pun) are we running to? What is that “prize” which we are aiming to “obtain”? Yes, St Paul talks of an “incorruptible” crown (1 Co 9:24), but this is simply reiterating the athletic analogy. A more comprehensive answer may be found in the only other place where he speaks of βραβεῖον (the Greek word being transliterated into the Latin “*bravium*”), a “prize” which is awarded to a winner: “I press towards the mark, to the prize of the supernal vocation of God in Christ Jesus” (Ph 3:14). Here he is writing to the Philippians and the “*bravium*”, the “prize”, is distinctly heavenly in character: a “supernal vocation” in the sense of a calling upward, and to a heaven which is as such beyond the senses.

“Know you not that they that run in the race, all run indeed, but one receiveth the prize? So run that you may obtain” (1 Co 9:24). This was clearly before they invented silver and bronze medals: it is either gold or nothing! It means that we have to be thoroughly competitive to win first prize, but should not necessarily see it as a competition between ourselves and the others in the race, even if there is the temptation to do so. How does St Paul himself describe running in the race: “I press towards the mark, to the prize” (Ph 3:14). He is focused, fixated (we could say), with the finish rather than on the other competitors, while certainly not considering them as competing against him.

Such a focus was seriously lacking, however, in those vineyard labourers in the Gospel, who had been hired in the early morning: “But when the first also came, they thought that they should receive more” (Mt 20:10). Although there is quite a difference between runners running in a race, in which only one of them is the winner, and labourers labouring for a householder, who pays them all an equal wage, the focus is still the same: our running for the prize or our labouring for the wage. The runner already knows the prize and the labourer his wage, since he has already settled with the householder on “a penny [denarius] a day” (Mt 20:2). We should therefore try not to be distracted by the others; and certainly not to cast the “evil eye” of envy upon them (Mt 20:15b).

We are all called to chastise our own bodies and to labour at the tasks that we have been given, refraining from intervening in those of others: *self-discipline* is really just that. Yes, I know: sometimes we have to discipline others. But how can we properly discipline them, if we have not already disciplined ourselves? Both running and labouring indeed require self-discipline, but is there any actual difference for us between prize and wage? How is the parable from the Epistle, and that from the Gospel, applied specifically to us?

Well, we may be the labourer who arrives at the earliest or at the eleventh hour, yet God rewards us for our work, however small it may be, and thereby shows himself to be “good” to all (Mt 20:15b); the monetary amount of the wage being irrelevant as such. And as regards our running in the race of life, St Paul does not in fact state that only one of us will win the prize, but rather that we should run as if this was the case: trying to enter through “the narrow gate”, as our Lord indeed instructs us in the Gospels (Mt 7:13, cf. Lk 13:24), even if all were saved in the end, which please God they will.

Our efforts on the track, like those in the vineyard, however, do not equate precisely with the prize, whose price tag we do not know anyway: the amount is again as such irrelevant. What matters is that both wage and prize are in the gift of the infinite goodness of God, who is ultimately the gift himself. He is indeed “good” to all, since all are able to start at the same starting line and all are given the same opportunity to go and labour in his vineyard. The questions we might therefore want to ask ourselves in this run-up (again please forgive the pun) to Lent could be: How am *I* doing? Where am *I* going, running?!