The Evening of Time

September 20th, 2020

In the spring of 1453, a cardinal by the name of Isidore of Kiev was involved in repairing some fortifications in Constantinople at his own expense when he was wounded. This man had written books of liturgy, worked for the reunion of the eastern and western churches at the Council of Ferrara, had written letters and traveled to this end, and had even been excoriated as a traitor and heretic for abandoning the faith. Today he is still known as Isidore the Apostate. There are no icons of him. In Constantinople once again, he worked hard, and yet even by the time he started on the repairs in late May, 1453, it was too late. The city was being sacked, and he only escaped because he had dressed up a corpse in his cardinal's robes. The corpse was dragged around the city and beheaded. Isidore was enslaved and taken back to Asia Minor, but managed to escape to Crete and lived out the rest of his life in Rome. Even when we are working with the best intentions and in a spirit of righteousness, we can realize that there is a limit to what can be accomplished. I imagine the poor cardinal spent many days and nights in prayer, aware that the city of Constantinople, his brothers and sisters, and he himself were running out of time.

In our gospel reading today, Jesus relates a parable that asks two questions. What will you do with your time and how will you receive the gift of God? Halfway through the parable, we get a sense of the first question, when the landlord comes back to the market and says: "'Why are you standing here idle all day?'" (Matthew 20:6). The end is near, and time is running out. These are familiar sentiments from soccer games, the news, apocalyptic literature, and from our own sleepless nights. I love time-lapse photography. It is always fascinating to see a long strip of time sped up. When I was a child, one of our churches used to show us science films in the evening. I would see time-lapse reels of plants springing up, producing flowers, opening their blossoms, and then closing them or withering away. Imagine a long history monograph condensed into the space of a haiku. Such is our life. The work day is limited. Our time is limited. Resources run out, technology breaks down, sickness comes, decay sets in. Voltaire once fumed that the game of chess was a waste of time: imagine moving little pieces of wood back and forth across a board for hours, when one could be writing a novel or building a bridge. When I look back on my life, I often lament the time wasted and lost. The hours lost to acedia or depression, the days lost to living in undesirable habitations. Most importantly, the years of failing to return a kindness, to reconcile with someone, to improve in a particular skill, to attain enough to help my family more or help others and become a good steward, to grow spiritually and deeply in prayer, to organize and articulate my thoughts, to express calm and kindness under every circumstance. I regret not having enough time with my childhood friends, many of whom died before the age of 30. I regret that I have not taught my children enough of the Bible, that I have not played with them enough, that I have not been a good enough friend to them, that I have not modeled Christlikeness enough. They are getting older too fast, and soon they will leave, and I wonder what impressions they will carry with them, or whether they will remember the presence of Christ in the home and the hope of salvation, despite our differences, despite my failures, despite the challenges of urban living. I think about my wife, and all of the good gifts I have not had the time to give her, about all of her unrequited sacrifices. Such is the way of time. It is not something we possess or cultivate; it is rightly compared to a river that just streams away, right through your fingers. And in the midst of such thoughts, Jesus is asking me, and he is asking you: "Why are you standing here idle all day?"

In contrast to our helplessness in the flow of time, the parable shows that the kingdom of heaven is active from one hour of the day to the next, from the dawn of time to its twilight: "‘For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire labourers for his vineyard" (Matthew 20:1). This alone shatters a great many of our philosophical expectations of God. Not all of us have had the best relationships with landlords, and here the Lord is compared to a landlord with a vineyard, out searching for unskilled labour to gather in the harvest. There is great urgency in this landlord; twice he says, "You also go into the vineyard" (Matthew 20:4,7). The world is not ours, and our very bodies are not ours. There is nothing in existence that is purely our creation, and there is nothing in existence that we truly own or fully understand. Our abilities, skills and knowledge sometimes blind us to this fact, but the earth is the Lord's (Psalm 24:1). All of us belong to this God, to this unseen landlord. Throughout time, the Lord has called humanity to him. In the morning of history, at noon, in the afternoon, into the twilight of time—God calls his children to come labour in His vineyard. In the garden, the Lord called Adam and Eve. In the time of the cataclysm, He called Noah and His family. After that disaster, He called Abram and His descendants. In the desert of Arabia, He called Moses to lead his children out of Egypt. In Egypt, He called the enslaved Hebrews to become his free children. In the time of settlement, He called judges and He called the people to return to him. In calling Samuel, He called a prophet and a judge. In time, He called kings and more prophets. And He continued to call the people to him. In their exile, God called to them. In their return, He called to them. After four hundred years of silence, John the Baptist came, calling out to everyone that the time was at hand. For God has called one last time. Jesus is the last question—the ultimate embodiment, the absolute incarnation of God's question to humanity: will you come into my vineyard? Will you be my child? Will you have faith in Jesus and be baptized, and follow Christ for the rest of time? To the end of the day, God never tires of calling people, seeking them out, desiring that they should find a reward at the end of their lives.

Who is God calling? The parable says: " And about five o’clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, “Why are you standing here idle all day?” They said to him, “Because no one has hired us.” (Matthew 20:6-7). Nobody else and nothing else could save them from emptiness, futility, poverty, loneliness. It reminds me of the way Ryszard Kapuściński painted the history of the world in his travel books. There are great regions and times where very little was happening. Human beings were unemployed or sick, overburdened with changeless, monotonous work, or wasting away with little hope of change. In his book, *Imperium,* an old Turkmen argues that civilization began in the desert—the oasis is the unsustainable anomaly. All the while lecturing on history, the old Turkmen spends the day drinking tea in a *chaykhana*, probably likewise unemployed and uncertain about the days to come in the newly liberated but impoverished republic. It also reminds me of a quote from the first paragraph of the novella *White Nights* by Fyodor Dostoyevsky: "From early morning I had been oppressed by a strange despondency. It suddenly seemed to me that I was lonely, that everyone was forsaking me and going away from me. Of course, any one is entitled to ask who 'everyone' was. For though I had been living almost eight years in Petersburg I had hardly an acquaintance." Time can abandon people to loneliness. The world promises various technological, philosophical, spiritual, and materialistic vineyards, but people find they are still standing around in the market, idle, and unable to make a meaningful spiritual life. The Lord calls the ones that nobody else hired; he loves them and brings them into a fruitful existence, an eternal existence.

The parable has shown us the urgency of time, the futility of the world, and something of the generous nature of the landlord. It also shows us the character of human beings, who can be ungrateful, judgmental, and utterly clueless about how the world works or what is right: "When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, 'Call the labourers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.' When those hired about five o’clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, saying, 'These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.' But he replied to one of them, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?' So the last will be first, and the first will be last.’" (Matthew 20:8-16). There are some horrible kinds of day labour under the sun, but there are many good kinds, as well. Many years ago, I did some day labour in the Kansai region for half a year. It was lovely work. And everyone got the same wage, which was around 8000 yen. At that time, five days of wages would have rented a nice bachelor apartment; a sixth day would have added a train pass, and by the end of the week, you could also have groceries. Your other weeks of labour would go towards your other necessities. Today, the diminishment of day labour has become a problem in Japan. There are traditionally three famous areas for this kind of work: Kamagasaki in Osaka, Kotobuki in Yokohama, and Sanya in Tokyo. I have walked the streets of Kamagasaki over two decades ago. Kotobuki is now only a shadow of what it once was—and many of the aging population are saddened by the loss of work, the loss of their neighbourhood, the shift from labour to welfare, the destruction of a whole culture (https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2016/09/24/national/social-issues/future-looks-bleak-yokohamas-day-laborers/). It is a great and wonderful thing to have work, to have a purpose, to have a place to go, to have a community related to that work, to have friends to work with. During Jesus' lifetime, the Romans were building the city of Sepphoris, and it is likely that Jesus, being a carpenter, not only worked there but knew quite a number of day labourers in Galilee that were thankful to have a way to make enough money to buy bread. One of our greatest needs in human existence is to be needed, to be useful, to be invited to contribute to creating and cultivating. The Lord gives us just that—but on an eternal scale.

The evening of our time might seem frightening, but evening is also when the rewards are distributed. In the kingdom of heaven, there is nothing to fear; there is much to expect, there is much to receive. The gifts of God are good. God not only gives to us earthly gifts, but God also gives us heavenly gifts. Throughout scripture, vineyards often represented the nation, the land, and the covenantal relationship between God and his people. In the Song of Songs, the vineyard symbolizes the heart and its relationship to God (Song of Songs 1). What will you do with your heart? What will you do with your time? How will you receive the gift of God? Time is flowing by—how are we responding to the gifts of God? Are we hanging out in the market, waiting for a better employer? Are we following Jesus into the vineyard? Are we sowing seeds of love and forgiveness? Are we urgent with the gospel, with sharing the good news, with keeping the commandments and beatitudes of Christ? Is our heart open to God at all times? The daily wage God offers is nothing less than God himself—his eternity and salvation and his glorious life of hope and peace. All other things He gives according to his wisdom and his justice, which are often inscrutable to us, but all of us are guaranteed the gift of Him who would dwell in us and save us. Psalm 24 says: "The earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it; for he has founded it on the seas, and established it on the rivers. Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord? And who shall stand in his holy place? Those who have clean hands and pure hearts, who do not lift up their souls to what is false, and do not swear deceitfully. They will receive blessing from the Lord, and vindication from the God of their salvation." Not long after raising Lazarus, Jesus said, "‘The light is with you for a little longer. Walk while you have the light, so that the darkness may not overtake you. If you walk in the darkness, you do not know where you are going. While you have the light, believe in the light, so that you may become children of light.’" (John 12:35-36). In the evening of time, in the spring of 1453, in the city of Constantinople, a cardinal knew the days were short, but he went about the Lord's work anyway, rebuilding fortifications in the hope of saving lives and souls. May we also answer the call of our Lord today.