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Septuagesima

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## SPRING-TRAINING

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This Sunday is Septuagesima, the ninth before Easter and the third before Lent: and that's to say it is one of the most significant turning points in the Church's year. Advent, Christmas, Epiphany: these have set before us the wonder of the Lord's Incarnation, and the regeneration of human nature that is revealed in him. The promise of regeneration is ours to grasp and so one of the Epistle Lessons for the season exhorts: "Be not conformed to this world, but be ye transformed by the renewing of your minds, that ye may prove" – experience the truth of - "what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect will of God".

The ancient lessons for Septuagesima begin a new phase: for they remind us, with unremitting practicality, that this transformation does not take place without labour and training. The reading of Genesis, which by ancient tradition begins this week, speaks of God's work in creation, and Man's labour in the garden – a labour which is directed to the Sabbath rest of God. In the very order of creation, it is revealed, as St. Augustine said, that "Thou, Lord, hast made us for thyself, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in thee."

The ancient epistle lesson speaks of the training of an athlete, a runner or a boxer; the gospel lesson, of labour in the vineyard to bring in the harvest. In one way these lessons speak generally about the place of discipline in the Christian life generally: in another way they are designed specifically to prepare us for Lent, a time of the Church's corporate spring-training for the spiritual life.

Septuagesima prepares us for Lent, and Lent is unquestionably a season of labour in the vineyard, of training for the spiritual contest, a time to practice "works worthy of repentance", the gospel triad of fasting, prayer, and almsgiving (St. Matthew 6): fasting to temper the appetites, prayer to deepen our love of God, almsgiving to express our love of neighbour. We practice self-denial, we curb the tyranny of the passions, that we may give ourselves more fully to God and neighbour. We fast from earthly bread that we may feed upon the bread of heaven, which is the word of God.

The good works of Lent, and of the Christian life generally, are only good works insofar as they are stirred up and sustained in us by repentance and faith, hope and charity toward God. "Work out your

own salvation with fear and trembling," says the Apostle, "for it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure" (Philippians 2:13). GGD

**The Rev'd Gavin G. Dunbar**

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