

Sermon for Trinity 9

“*Now these things were our examples (emblematic)*” [1 Cor. 10:6]

Those who were glad to be rid of the Book of Common Prayer were doubtless especially relieved to be rid of an awkward pair of readings for this Sunday. My suspicion is that they were not felt to be especially awkward before the 1700s, when a more scrupulous approach to texts began to force its way into Scriptural study. In earlier times, a more Christ-centered, allegorical or emblematic form of interpretation provided a basic way of understanding Scripture. Allegory is now seen as a bit crafty, a bit dishonest and a bit ‘anti-history,’ but Scripture itself clearly presupposes it, else would the *Song of Songs* not be found there.

In fact we find that allegory and (early forms of) history writing are inseparable in Sacred Scripture. The point of all this writing and reading is to discover God’s purpose and its meaning. For the Apostles, that view of history intensifies because their understanding of history pre-supposes an outcome, a goal. As St. Paul insists in today’s letter: These things “are written for our admonition, upon whom the *ends of the (ages) world are come.*” Yes, Christian history is not cyclical but linear, and ‘we have reached the end of the line.’

Now, at the very beginning of the letter we meet a difficulty because the Rock of Massah is not said to have moved in the Old Testament books that we know. This idea is found in other ancient sources, towards which St. Paul, clearly, felt no suspicion. There is a back-story to these ancient texts: “The spring is Torah” (*Damascus Covenant* from Qumran). No more did St. Paul suppose that – as pre-existent – the Christ had been unable to interact with His people until ‘history’ let Him. Rather, Christ had submitted to history in the same way as He had submitted to death. He embraced limitation, but *these limitations could not hold Him.*

This was not just an idea that came to St. Paul in a quiet moment but his actual experience – as one “out of due time.” [1 Cor. 15:8] In a sense, both disciple and Lord are out of their times, anachronistic. St. Paul never supposed that because history had been transcended, that “history was bunk.” Of course, what St. Paul understood by ‘history’ is quite a question! Clearly for him there was no need for historical reconstruction, to retrace events: “Even though we have known Christ after the flesh, yet now we know Him so no more.” [2 Cor. 5:16] Admittedly, this is yet one more enigmatic saying, but it seems to indicate a simultaneous regard for human experience and a readiness to go beyond it.

My focus has been on a comparatively theoretical cluster of points, but more readers will pick up on St. Paul’s moral reasoning – “destroyed of the destroyer.” Fearsome and fierce words for sure! Many passages (but not *Job*) in the Old Testament take such ‘visitations’ as a matter of course. St. Paul is interpreting the Exodus in the spirit in which these histories are there presented. He is not nervous about the strong medicine, and his conclusion is, perhaps, rather breezy: “God is faithful... but will with the temptation also make a way to escape.” [1 Cor. 10:13] Yes, breezy words! as St. Paul could hardly say that his Lord had been given a way by which He had escaped.

Well, whilst we are on the subjects of allegory and morality, let’s increase our difficulties by glancing at today’s Gospel. It has to be frankly admitted that not all the Lord’s parables are readily comprehended. It is not impossible that a few started life as two stories that have been merged into one, over the course of time, becoming obscure in the process; but such speculation won’t help us arrive at meaning. With today’s example we are rather in the dark about the legal status of the Lord’s agent or steward. If anyone was foolish in the story it appears to be the Lord himself, he gave his agent too much warning instead of sending word to all these characters to have nothing to do with his (former) steward? We also need to register that the Lord’s teachings *are not moral* in any humanistic sense, whether that humanism comes from Greek classicism or French existentialism. The Lord’s sayings are either too strict “turn the other cheek, let the dead bury their dead...” or too lax “make to yourselves friends with the mammon of unrighteousness,” but they are seldom what we would expect.

We have to grasp the kingdom, force our way in (if possible). This is not a programme for social reform – however much we might wish that it were. The detail to which our Blessed Lord went in this story is also rather surprising; we have the precise measures of the oil and the wheat. Doubtless, these have been allegorized, but where is the elephantine allegory? Is it not that our Blessed Lord has lessened our debts? Is not the dishonest steward an image of Jesus in His imperative to bring remission? We may heighten the allegory by saying that – insofar as the moral of this story is not moral philosophy – it is the God and Father who is defrauded, and it is the Father's Agent (with a capital A) who is commended. This too is right, so it seems to me, so long as we don't pinch the metaphor. The motivation for all that the Father, Son and Holy Ghost accomplish is out of love for humanity. The Eternal Son does not make the Father change His mind, nor is Jesus punished in our stead (the steward got away with it!).

If we accept the story in a poetic-allegorical spirit, one that is deeply Christ-centered, we can indeed say that our Lord defrauded His Father of the compensation that was His due. It is not only God's motivation that is eternal, self-giving *charity* but our interpretations that must be governed by a corresponding love; and then, even if we do not get the interpretation quite 'right,' we should avoid getting it badly wrong.