

## Sermon Notes for Trinity VIII

*“whose never-failing providence ordereth all things” (collect)*

There might seem to be a case for a sermon on the “vanity of human wishes”. Hopes of a recovery from the pandemic and a return to “normal” seem to have been dashed – and it is not the case that those hopes were clearly sinful. Even if we view the pandemic as a visitation from God, yet the Church of England always in the past also prayed for deliverance.

Some prayers are silly. God is not, thank God, so perverse as to grant silly prayers. To that extent, we do *not* have to follow Juvenal's warnings about the vanity of human wishes. For Christian prayer is not magic. It is much more an exercise of Christian (not worldly) wisdom. The preacher's standard point is that in prayer we try (if we are wise) to understand God's purposes and to put ourselves alongside them. We cannot bully God. We cannot change his mind. We can learn to change *our* minds – to pray “Thy will be done”, not just generally, but in the particular situation which concerns us. Resignation is an essential Christian discipline. It goes with hope.

We do not abandon particular prayers. We are not forced back on “mens sana in corpore sano”. Indeed, it is not a *very* Christian prayer. Ask Paul about the 'thorn in the flesh" (whatever it was). The prayer (II Cor. 12.7-10) to be delivered from it was not obviously sinful. But the answer was “My grace is sufficient for thee”. In other words, you will have to live with it, but I will help you. “But why, Lord; is it not obvious that the work of an evangelist is hindered?” “You do not know what I am doing through you; my strength is made perfect in weakness.” It is all too easy to tell God what to do. Start there, if you must. But expect to learn that the issue is not always as we see it. We do not believe that God gives up on the world. We do not fall back on only seeking “spiritual” goods. It is still possible – but perhaps not much longer – to be a Christian politician or to try to achieve some social good. But always with the humble realisation that even if the motivation was good, the method may not work. Our knowledge even of worldly matters is at best partial.

Brave indeed is the preacher who confidently expounds God's purposes in the confused politics of the “time, two times and half a time” which we were experiencing before the pandemic added to the confusion. If any tries, I am sure the warning is “Beware of false prophets”. God does not, as a general rule, reveal the details of his purposes. Hence the drastic rejection of such prophecy in Zechariah 13. There have been exceptions; but we do well to start from a very sceptical position. It is unlikely that God inspires anybody now with the messages of an Isaiah. Human folly is only compounded if the preacher calls the Holy Spirit in aid of his or her imaginings.

False prophets are numerous; they get all the attention (even if it is only to be mocked). They have adherents – for a time. They may have official positions. But their fruits are not the fruits of the Gospel. All that we know. Wesley added that (in the practical circumstances of his time) Christians could not generally avoid false prophets. Some of what they preached was true and the sacraments they offered valid. Our position is easier. We can avoid them. Consistent error is more common than partial truth. Their sacraments are often very doubtful.

The concern for any preacher is whether he too is numbered among them. And in these difficult times the concern for any serious Christian is whether the preacher he hears can be trusted. So the hearer becomes a critic – as does the preacher. And this does not help any of us to grow in the faith. Our partial answer in continuing Anglicanism is to have fixed readings and to urge the clergy to conform to long-standing interpretations of those readings, plus the background given by their regular bible-reading in morning and evening prayer. This should prevent much error. It is not exciting or easy. “What is truly new is certainly false” is a wise caution – but there is development in Christian experience even if we are reluctant to admit it in Christian doctrine. And the minister should be alert to what might be learned even in these times.

For God does not forsake his people, or those for whom Christ died. Now is a time of at best much noise, at worst much false prophecy. And yet there is providence. But do not expect to realise it in the short term. “God is working his purpose out”. Eventually, not probably in this life, we will be able to understand and be thankful. Until then, we do know enough to do many right things. And not every mistake, particularly in the obscurities of the world of political choices as recently thrust upon us, is a deliberate sin.