

Sermon Notes for Trinity VII

“servants to God” (Epistle)

The Epistle describes a Christian experience which is not ours. Paul did not know the Romans personally, but he correctly assumed they were all adult converts. They had known what it was to have been “servants of sin”. Not that they had all been “notorious evil livers”. But that they had all lived their former lives under a fundamental mistake. One of two different mistakes, for if the Gentiles had lived without knowledge of God, the Jews did know the one true God – but misunderstood Him. Either way, there was a past and a contrast.

We are not in that situation. Strictly, like all Christians, we are twice-born. But infant baptism and a Christian upbringing does not give us personal knowledge of a mistaken past. Even the “backslider recovered” contemplates not mistake but rebellion – a very different matter. So how are we to use the Epistle?

The great lie of the secular world is to assume that it is “normal” and so faith is a mistake which might be tolerated, but only if it is not serious. It is indeed the same attitude as the old USSR constitution allowing (not much) freedom of religious worship and (a great deal of) freedom of anti-religious propaganda. In much the same way, Judaism was for the Empire “*religio licita*” - a superstition which was tolerated, but only until it became inconvenient. For a brief period, the Church experienced the same contempt; then it was seen to be a threat.

We must not be fooled into accepting the secularists' analysis. Christians – and also orthodox Jews and I assume Muslims – do not try to put a religious tinge onto the godless normal. They have a completely different analysis of that world which imagines itself without God. That we have never belonged to that world and cannot call on personal experience of it does not invalidate the analysis.

If God is God (the Creator with a purpose for his creation), then the godless “normal” is rebellion (conscious or not) against Him. This is, I think, a fair summary of the early chapters of Romans. The secular state has indeed to organise itself somehow, for anarchy is worse; so Paul will go on to assert that even Nero is “ordained of God”. We do not attribute total evil to the state (until the last days). It delivers some peace, some justice. But it exists on a false basis and in denial of the truth. And the more it imposes “shared values”, the worse.

The Gospel does not consist in calculating just how evil the current state is in this country (or any other). That is not important now and was not important to Paul either. We are here to learn our duty to God, not to study the subtleties of evil (except in so far as they might deceive us). For Paul's Romans, they had been part of the “system” (what “everyone” “really” takes for granted), and they knew they had repudiated and rejected it in order to serve God. They could see (now, with hindsight) what it was. They could not, of course, avoid living in the world; Paul does not instruct a *total* avoidance of interaction with unbelievers. But they knew the choice they had made. We do not have that advantage. We have been brought up with the myth of a Christian country; we have had to learn that it is not there. We have not made so decisive a choice, though our persistence in the faith when so many abandon it is a choice for God.

When we were young, there was much imagining of “freedom”. Now, on the contrary, there is a growing attempt to *impose* “shared values” (the idea refutes itself!) Perhaps we can now understand Paul better. The practical choice is not freedom or servitude; it is “choose whom ye will serve” (Joshua 24:15), or, as Jesus put it, “You cannot serve God and Mammon” - with the implication that you will perforce serve one or the other. The “normal” of the secular world is a horribly powerful servitude: a pressure to conform to an imposed mis-called “liberty”. Because we have to live in the world, we cannot evade the pressure. But we know “the end of those things is death”. Not physical death, for we must have that anyway; but spiritual death - the rotted person, so irrevocably locked into the rebellious world of its “choices” that even God cannot rescue it.

We need to realise the nature and gravity of the choice. I do not think we need spend long meditating on hell, however. Better give time to choice of God and delight in him than to rejection of the alternative. For God is creator and sustainer. He is also redeemer and sanctifier. We have chosen in baptism and reaffirm in the Creed our part with God, and therefore our duty to discover and follow His path. And that path is “life” - again, not as if we avoid physical death, but spiritual life with God “through Jesus Christ our Lord”. For the chief end of man is “to know God and enjoy him for ever”.