

Sermon Notes for Easter 4

“he will guide you into all truth” (Gospel)

The Gospel already looks forward to Pentecost, to the promise of the Paraclete, the Spirit of Truth. The Resurrection is only completed in us with that gift.

Both John (here) and Paul (generally) seem to me to have confidence in the Church, which includes all the local bodies with which they dealt. There are of course problems but we never hear of Paul abandoning a Church. He does “deliver individuals over to Satan”, but even that is in hope of their restoration. A brutal analysis compared Paul's missionary methods with ours. He came to a town without resources of his own, gathered a congregation, gave them at most a few week's teaching – and then trusted that the Spirit would guide them into all practical truth. Subsequent visits, or even letters, could only be occasional. We (in these days of “church planting”) send an expensively trained and fully paid missionary, we expect to organise a building, we expect that the emerging congregation (if it succeeds) will be closely supervised by the parent body for as long as it lasts. We in the Traditional Anglican Church have not been able to afford such a process of planting – so we are failing even to survive, because we have not developed any alternative way of mission either.

Of course there are excuses for us. Our problems are different from those of Paul and John. We cannot hope for converts with a background in Judaism. We have the benefit (or rather the burden) of centuries of experience. We have seen erroneous change. So we have put our efforts into preservation (even though we nowhere have the resources to provide what we took for granted in our youth). We have given little thought to practical mission, even though it is obvious that nobody younger than ourselves has experience of what we try to preserve. It is no disgrace to have helped some people keep the faith for some time; but how much less than the Gospel promise!

Still, we are Christians, we receive the promised gift. What is God trying to make of it in us? The promise is huge. “He shall glorify me: for he shall receive of mine, and shall show it unto you. All things that the Father hath are mine: therefore said I, that he shall take of mine, and shall show it unto you.” It is by the Spirit that we receive from Christ everything that he has from the Father as Son. This is a huge promise. We are caught up into the life of the Blessed Trinity. If we can achieve little as a remnant congregation, yet we should ask what we can do as individuals, not in our own strength, but on the basis of what we have received and continue to receive.

I think the starting point is to realise what we are – what God is giving us. If we never contemplate the possibility that we can be fully functioning Christians (with all our defects) then we are not allowing God to complete his work in us.

The obvious mark of a Christian is that he prays. I do not mean just intercession (that is our duty, but only a small part of it). Full Christian prayer is conscious living with God. In this there is much worship, some penitence and thanksgiving, as well as some intercession. The Prayer Book morning and evening prayer, particularly because of the use of the psalms, are appropriate vehicles for this at the level of vocal prayer. It is also right to make time simply to be with God.

Christianity is a style of living. In this it follows the Old Covenant. For what we call “law” is better rendered as “practical teaching”. Christ is much more than a teacher (albeit of a new and more complete system than the old law available to everybody) but he is that. We recite the Lord's Summary of the Law here; we do well, but we must remember that love, whether of God or of neighbour, is what we do rather than what sentiments we entertain.

Evangelicals would go on to expect witness. I confess myself puzzled. In the general confusion of the modern internet, we cannot make ourselves heard. I do not imagine that John Wesley would find street preaching (if indeed lawful!) very effective now, for we, unlike him, do not have hearers with even a faint knowledge of the faith. But there can be no church growth, or even maintenance, unless the gospel is being heard somehow. Paul proved from scripture that it was being heard in his day. “Great was the company of the preachers”. He cannot have meant just himself and other evangelists. He must include the members of the churches he founded, and even the Jews scattered throughout the world. God will organise his growth his way.

We can be guided into all truth. But we will have to give ourselves to it.