

Sermon Notes for Trinity 18

ye come behind in no gift (Epistle)

Our claims for ourselves ought to be modest. We do not claim that the Church of England was ever the perfect form of Christianity. We do not succeed, with our limited resources, in perpetuating the best even of the Church of England. Only we believe that the Way we received, which had been legitimate (in God's eyes – what else matters) could not suddenly cease to be legitimate. In believing this, we do not imagine that nothing should ever change. Change there must be; the task is to find out, with the utmost care, what is appropriate change consistent with what we have received.

In secular terms, both we and the state religion are visibly failing, for instance numerically. But that was never the right test. God has prospered remnants before; yet it is equally true that God's judgement does sometimes wipe out a false path from the earth. However, there is an individual application. We are going to appear before the judgement seat, and how well will our Christian life have prepared us? Not that our earthly life can ever entitle us to heaven; but if we have not made a serious beginning in response to God in this life, we will be at best grossly ill-fitted for heaven, at worst incapable of it (which is hell). For those who look for trouble, this sermon is not preaching the Gospel; it assumes that “salvation is of Christ the Lord”, but having received it, we have to live it and will do so better or worse.

Today's Epistle, in isolation, might suggest that there is no problem. If Corinth has received every gift it could possibly need for the Christian life, why not we? But we know how quickly that letter will turn to a catalogue of problems in that church, so grave that we might be tempted to read the Epistle (or at least “ye come behind in no gift”) as satire. I do not think it is. Grace has been poured out. Nothing from God's side has been lacking. If that were not so, then the human problems of the church of Corinth would be inevitable and expected. They are, after all, those everybody observes in a secular world. (We would adjust, to be more precise, in a fallen world.)

Cue a sermon on the persistence of original sin even in the regenerate? Hardly, for our business in church is with hope and God's mercy and grace, not mere description of a problem. (The description can be found in Article 9 of the 39.) Probably it is only the redeemed who will with hindsight see how bad their condition was. Not all truth is for declaring at all times, and certainly no sermon, even a long one, can “fully preach the gospel of God”.

We can and should apply the Epistle to ourselves, because God has only one gift, and that is himself. In other terms, “he giveth not the Spirit by measure” (John 3.34). His giving is all or nothing; we cannot be slightly redeemed. It is our response that admits of degree, just as their response did; not God's gift.

So “in everything you are enriched by him”. If this is the Corinthians' opinion of themselves, it is well-founded, as we have seen. Paul accepts this – which does not free them from problems. For us, we need to realise that this is the working of God's grace (or rather his “presence and his very self”) within us. There is an instruction to Timothy to “stir up the gift of God which is in thee”, and while the immediate reference is to ordained ministry, there is a general application to all baptised Christians. There is a “priesthood of all believers” which applies to each of us individually and not just to the church collectively. Do we take that seriously? All Christians have a priesthood of prayer; of thanksgiving for the world and of prayer for its needs. Do we exercise it?

“The testimony of Christ was confirmed in you”. Paul may think of an outward event; but if so, we do not know its character. At the most extreme, a fruit of baptism may have been speaking in tongues (compare the twelve men at Ephesus in Acts 19). It was obvious to each of them (and also to Paul with his colleagues) that the Corinthians had been objectively changed. Not just that they were living more moral lives. Christ was evidencing himself in them. Now this, we would say, is a reality of conversion, an experience which those baptised in infancy and living as Christians all their lives do not share. True, but for us sinners (Article 9 again!) the need to repent, to turn back to God, is never lacking; and repentance of even the smallest matter brings its form of this blessing. We may not be able to see the change, the growth in ourselves. We do not need to. Paul could.

“Ye come behind in no gift”. If the Corinthians think this, it might well be on the basis of knowledge of other churches, real or imagined. The schisms among them are proof of such knowledge. Paul, with his own knowledge, does not challenge the opinion. This is not solely about the gift of tongues. They think – and have reason to think – that they have been equipped with wisdom and knowledge. Now clearly becoming a Christian will not add to your IQ or enhance your memory! Paul is thinking, and we should be thinking, of spiritual gifts from God enabling that informed response to Him. The gift is given. We can use it or neglect it.

“Who shall also confirm you unto the end”. You probably know that “confirm” is a suspect translation; “strengthen” is safer. Possibly the Corinthians were more interested in the “day of our Lord Jesus Christ”, what some call the “second coming”, than in their deaths. Both thoughts are appropriate. We have to die; we will be judged. They knew they needed, and we also need, the gift of “final perseverance”. Christ will do his part; will we? While we have some power over our lives we should pray for that gift. For many of us, it is a time to study Jeremy Taylor's “Holy Dying” rather than his “Holy Living”. I am sure that God's mercies continue through decay and dementia, hard though it is to discern them. But we have to prepare ourselves while there is time.