

Sermon Notes for Trinity VIII

“Beware of false prophets” (gospel)

This is a difficult gospel. Even Wesley confessed himself reluctant to preach about it. But how can one avoid the topic? We cannot treat the Lord's warnings as if they did not matter. It is an unavoidable task (even outside the not infrequent cases of notorious evil life among ministers of religion) for every Christian to examine the situation in which he continues. It is likewise the duty of every minister to examine himself, his preaching, his conduct of worship and his living, lest he has become, perhaps without conscious error, a false prophet.

Now God has only imperfect humans to use as His ministers. We do not seek perfection in them. And “the unworthiness of the ministers . . . hinders not the effect of the sacrament”. (39 Articles) And a sermon may in itself be correct and beneficial even if the person preaching it is a hypocrite. These cautions are important.

It is also a danger that while we should be receiving the Word, we make ourselves into critics of it. A danger, yet in the last resort unavoidable. With all the cautions that can be given, still it is possible that a particular minister is such a danger that we have no choice but to avoid him – or for the minister, that the least bad he can do for his flock is to cease from his ministry. (This sermon was not written against the Bishop of Winchester!) It is not good for ministers to be unsupervised. It is beneficial (and some sort of guarantee) that to be under discipline. There is a system in our Church, however inadequate, which enables the laymen to express his doubts about the content of preaching, or the conduct of worship, or the manner of life of the minister, to a superior authority.

Now false preaching is not so much the occasional error of theology, but an attitude and choice of subjects which departs from the economy of salvation as the Church has come to understand it. It is wise that we have a lectionary (however imperfect) and that preaching is in general on some part of the readings. This discipline reduces the risks. It may be a hazard that I spend too long trying to work out the meaning of a passage and not long enough applying it (and with the attendant risk of explaining it away). The wise Christian will – just as I myself do – see how other preachers have tackled the passage, especially the great names of the past. Those who cannot worship weekly might wish to find “lectionary central” for older expositions of the lectionary we use.

Again, this is why we have a set order of worship. I do not believe the perfection of the book of Common Prayer – but the set order is a protection for both clergy and laity. Changes must not be lightly made. I do not know (because I do not consider the topic) whether I could improve the liturgy we inherited. I have not and would not do so without both authority and consent.

Again, this is why the Church of England moralises in its liturgy. It did not know any double standard; maybe the standard of morality expressed in the Catechism and Communion (and the Ten Commandments in the Communion) was not very high but there was some clarity, which has since been lost. For without some structure it is easy for the layman to imagine a breach of morals making the minister a false prophet where there is only a difference of taste.

There may be a duty to avoid a minister of religion as a false prophet of the kind denounced. It was perhaps easier in Galilee. Judaism (outside Jerusalem and immediate environs) had become a largely family religion. It was not compulsory to be part of synagogue worship; one could avoid false teaching (if encountered) without being disloyal to God. We do not know how frequently an ordinary Jew paid for a sacrifice at the Temple, or was present at a feast there, but neither of these were in themselves occasions of teaching. So once error was detected, it could simply be avoided. Our situation is less simple. Christianity does have public (and sacramental) worship as an obligation and the state's restrictions have at last been withdrawn. If we accept that almost all worship in the state religion is in some degree tainted with falsehood, (and nothing less justified our separation from it) yet the remedy has not been without loss, or without further danger. And we cannot neglect the risk that to identify a false prophet is to have nowhere else to worship.

So indeed we all have an unavoidable duty to pay regard to our Lord's teachings in this passage. But carefully, knowing the consequent dangers.