

Sermon for Trinity XIV

“Walk in the Spirit”

It is easy to convert this passage into “two ways” morality: there is the way of the Spirit and the way of the flesh, the choice is before you; make your choice and live it out. And of course the way of the Spirit is the right, if difficult, choice. You may think that the Sermon on the Mount legitimises this thought of two ways, so what's the problem? Indeed it does, and the early Church did embrace this thinking (it is found in the “Teaching of the twelve Apostles”), and as an abstract pattern it is not mistaken. There is a Christian way of life, and there are other ways which all, however different they may be, lead away from God. Not the least point of the “Affirmation of St. Louis” and of subsequent attempts to maintain the older Anglican teaching is to affirm that way.

Yrs, but “handle with care”. One of the most dangerous texts is “if you wish, you can keep the commandments” (which for a Jew are not just prohibitions but also positive duties). The quotation is indeed Jewish, from Ecclesiasticus (the wisdom of Jesus ben Sira) 15.15. (In the terms of the 39 Articles, that book is not authoritative as a statement of doctrine.) It suggests that lack of perfection is, quite simply, your fault. This is, at bottom, the error of Pelagius – you should not need God's help to live a godly life. You merely need to have been told what it is. A Jew would say that the Law serves that purpose. Pelagius was trying to teach Christians, so he could only convert Christ's teachings into a new law. But Christianity is not a new law, nor another moral philosophy (though when I studied the subject, moral philosophers were no longer interested in the good life!)

Now Paul's analysis is not the simple “two ways”. He, like his Saviour, believes that you must be born again. Like it or not, you are by the fact of human birth “flesh” (best understood as human nature without God; we call it “fallen”). Not that you commit every one of the catalogue of “works of the flesh” every day. You may well say truthfully that you have never committed adultery or murder. But again remember not Paul but his Saviour, about committing those sins in your heart. If you are wise, you examine yourself in relation to these sins and seek God's forgiveness for them (as we do at the least every time we recite the Lord's Prayer). You do well. But that is not enough to make a Christian. Again, we read of the “fruits of the Spirit” and we agree these are good. Perhaps we try to live like that. And that too is not enough to make a Christian.

Paul did not say “I will instruct and teach you the way you must go” (Psalm 32.8), as a two ways moralist might. He said “walk in the Spirit”. This is only open to Christians, to those who have received the Spirit. I doubt Paul had any advice for those who were not Christians other than, of course, the Gospel. We should not try to construct such advice either.

We are not expected to succeed in our own strength, but by God's gift of his Holy Spirit. Well yes, but we received that gift in baptism. Why are the fruits of the Spirit not obvious in us? Possibly, because we do not pray enough. But there is a sadder, but in the end more hopeful, truth. This life is not generally a place of Christian perfection. Or if, with the Wesleys, we wish to hold out the possibility of a Christian perfection, it is one consistent with imperfections. For in this life we are not free from factual error, or defective reasoning, or the weakness of the flesh, or temptations. Even the best of us will make mistakes, which it is debatable (because there was no intent to depart from God's will) whether they should be called sins or not. They are certainly less than God's will. No Christian is ever able to stop saying “forgive us our trespasses” or “deliver us from evil”.

Our life in this world is then a place of Christian struggle. There is no simple moment in which the works of the flesh wholly cease in us, though we may indeed be given God's help not to fall much or deeply. There is no promise of a moment after which the fruits of the Spirit fill all our lives, though God has many different ways of working in us and it is not wrong to pray for this gift.

Nothing in the Christian life is “earned”, which is why we are cautious about talk of “merits”, except as applied to Christ. All is of gift. But the gift is still offered, however little use we have made of it in the past, however little we deserve it. Paul carefully talks of the “fruits of the Spirit” - fruits of His working in us and not human achievements. Love, joy, peace and the rest of them: may they be found in our lives. And so “fit us for heaven, to live with thee there”.