

Sermon Notes for Trinity IV

“the creation itself shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption” (Epistle)

Our politics is unhappy. It was before the virus and will be after it. It is not the task of a Christian preacher to instruct you how to think about this. Rather, what does God think about this? Perhaps he values such troubles as a demonstration to fallen man of the fallen motives which govern him. Certainly the devil values it, as a means of sowing discord.

What is important, and perhaps most important for former Anglicans who inherit a peculiar myth of the Christian state, is to recognise that we live in a post-Christian anti-religious world, where there are no certain human values receiving general respect, much less God's law. It means that much of the wisdom we have received from recent centuries does not apply, and we have to go further back to the time before Constantine.

We might indeed learn something from Anglicanism under persecution, whether under the military dictatorship of Cromwell or under James II and William III, but in these periods the hostile state was after its kind Christian, not secular.

So we begin by unlearning all the nonsense about “man come of age”. Man has not advanced since God saw that “every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually” (Genesis 6.5). That is why the promise of the “new heart” is fundamental to Christianity. “You must be born again”. If we try to weaken that, there is no gospel left. However, Paul does not stop there. It is not just man that has been corrupted. We are a little too prone to accept “All things bright and beautiful” as a total statement. Now that “God saw everything that he had made, and behold it was very good” is not in dispute. But we can no longer see that; we need the much subtler wisdom to discern both the goodness of the original creation and the distortion to which it has been subjected, without falling into the alternative error that the created order is simply evil.

For it is a truth that not everything is equally or completely corrupted. In so far as human thought can be valid – and we assume that all the time in our daily lives, mostly correctly – then it is possible for fallen man to have a knowledge of the good, however imperfect, and some ideas of how to promote it. Nothing is up to God's standard, of course. In the end there will be “a new heaven and a new earth” because God's purposes cannot be perfected in the damaged creation. But until then there is better and worse and some discernment thereof.

We cannot avoid living in this world. Nobody survives, certainly nobody flourishes, without human interaction. Islam may in measure manage to create an isolated community minimally related to the rest of the town, or nation, or world. But Christianity has not normally attempted this and we are not going to manage it now. In so far as the spreading of the Gospel is still possible, it would be the wrong approach. In our weakened condition, we can do little more than try to sustain each other in the faith; much of the time we, like Esther (2.20), have to keep our faith hidden; but if God gives us an opportunity to offer the faith to others, it has to be taken.

So we are Christians in a godless world (but actually devoted to a variety of secular idols) which demands conformity. We know that our citizenship is in heaven (Philippians 3.20) and such conformity is not always right. I think we will have to revisit “passive obedience”, which, like almost every word in the “Vicar of Bray” is a genuine theological idea of the period concerned. We do not have to undertake state employment and its obligations. We do not have to seek public office. We do not have to vote. We can be careful what employment outside the state sector we undertake, to minimise active participation in evil. And so evil will triumph? For a time, indeed, but “his doom is writ”.

In short, it is bad; and it gets worse before it gets better. But “for the elect's sake, whom he chose, he shortened the days” (Mark 13.20).