

Trinity 4

“why beholdest thou the mote . . . but perceivest not the beam” (gospel).

These early sermons after Trinity include some very sobering readings. Today we have the motes and beams. Christians of long standing may be tempted to imagine they have got beyond the basics, but it is not so. No Christian should ever think himself free from taking Christ's warnings to heart, however simple and obvious they appear to be. For, as we know, it is always the most basic sins that we find, upon examining our consciences, we still commit.

So there is the warning against over-rating the mote that is in our brother's eye. This can be taken with other warnings such as “judge not”. Now one may say that the reformation was inextricably linked to that sin; and the sin has been since repeated in an infinite regress of further denunciation and separation. We too in the continuing movement are guilty; we have judged and found wanting, and separated from the separation. And indeed the continuing movement has been remarkable even within protestantism for the way it subdivides. Yes there were and are failings in Catholicism; were they ever sufficient to justify the sins of the reformation? Are they still sufficient, and are the consequent bodies, including ourselves, so remarkable for virtue and the gifts of the Spirit?

But of course the warnings can be applied to secular life. It is tempting to judge others. But do we need to have an opinion? Do we have the knowledge of facts and experience to form one? Almost certainly not. My giving opinions on these topics will not help you to live better, and will probably cause me (and you) to live worse. In the unlikely case of a journalist (or archbishop) coming to me for “ghostly counsel”, I must provide it. But not anticipate the situation.

We do not, then, have a duty to judge others (usually). Rather, our duty is to follow the right path ourselves. It is, of course, a “narrow way”, but we must be careful of making it still narrower. Just possibly, we will be called upon to justify the right path. Occasionally, it will be right to do so (often the demand is not for edification but a means of expanding controversy) but even then it is more important to assert what is right than to discourse on what is wrong.

Yes, the devil masquerades as an angel of light and in that guise shows us the faults, the genuine faults for all he cares, of others whether in the Catholic church or our nearer brethren or the secular world. But Christ has warned us these are probably motes. On his instructions, we must endure much for unity, we must not make these motes, these little specks of sawdust, into stumbling-blocks. Of course it just might be true that God's law has been deliberately rejected in a major point – but the threshold is set very high. The devil, on the other hand, wants to hide our failings from us. Christ has warned us that they may be whole beams, huge structural timbers in comparison to the motes of sawdust. We had better not be wiser than He is!

So how are we to find our failings? The first duty is self-examination. If we do not look for our sins and confess them, at least to God and if we cannot quiet our conscience (as the Prayer Book would have it) to his minister, how can they be remedied? And we must be critical of ourselves, as is appropriate for those who may have beams in our eyes. Also, we must pray to God for the gift to discern our sins, and have enough knowledge of our duties as Christians to make this discernment possible. Even if we only read the Catechism, or the Beatitudes, or “Hear O Israel”, we would have a sobering starting-point.

The second way of finding our faults, and it is somewhat contrary to the sermon so far, is brotherly correction. We all need the humility to receive correction – there is no get-out clause for the clergy - and that is still true if we have to be so careful about giving it! “Judge not” indeed, especially in the vapid and ill-informed denunciations from a safe distance; but do be ready both to give and to receive help, for that is an essential feature of the love of the brethren.

From Keble on this passage: “It cannot be but that every hour as we go on through the world, we shall see faults greater or less, motes or beams in the eyes of such as are with us: and the sight will surely do us harm, if we be not always severe in forcing ourselves to be moved by it to the remembrance of our own faults, and of Him Who dwells in us to help us in triumphing over them. But let us keep Him always before us, and humble ourselves always before Him: so shall no wickedness of man shake our faith or do us harm.”