

## Sermon Notes for Trinity 9

*upon whom the ends of the world are come (epistle)*

The epistle and gospel are technically among the hardest to expound. I could attempt to explain the logic point by point, but that belongs to an essay rather than a sermon. Please just accept that there is logic. There are more useful topics to extract. We know that there is such a thing as rabbinic humour, and indeed that the book of Jonah already reveals a taste for using the grotesquely funny to make a serious spiritual point. There is a sense in which Paul was demonstrating that he could do rabbinic exegesis with the best of them. The “rock that followed them” is not his fantasy, though his association of it with the Anointed One is new.

This matters for us, because there is a danger of an unintentional anti-Judaism. The proper term is Marcionism, after the (failed) candidate for the papacy Marcion, who denied that the Old Testament had anything to do with God. We would not be so foolish, but we are at risk of feeling Jewish history before Christ does not matter much. This is not the way either Paul or his Lord thought.

God has only ever had one plan for us men and for our salvation and it works through the chosen people. Paul is sure of that. Does that mean that Gentiles must become Jews in order to be Christians? Circumcision is the critical step here (for men; the only entry rite for women was proselyte baptism). That is a mistake, says Paul. We do not become Jews after the flesh. But nevertheless our salvation involves being added to the chosen people. Their history becomes ours. They are “our fathers”. Christian baptism has this inevitable consequence. For the Corinthian Christians, who had been, we suspect, at least on the fringes of the synagogue before Paul's preaching, this was deeply reassuring. Christianity was a belonging, not a mere speculative opinion. So Paul starts to build confidence. Then comes the “but”. The wilderness years are a story of rebellions and their consequences. One might be surprised that there remained any Israelites to enter the promised land. In this section of the analysis Paul is not being fanciful; he is summarising what the text says. Is this what we have accepted on ourselves? If this is what it is to be the chosen people, then better the flesh-pots of Egypt? Paul does not want to hide the risk. There were many sins in the wilderness. These same sins are still possible and the risk greater, for we are those “upon whom the ends of the world are come”.

We do not read these passages merely for intellectual fascination with a moment in the early history of the Church. Even in the first century Clement of Rome bids the Corinthians to reread Paul's letter as applying to them and authoritative to settle new disputes among them. We accept Paul's letters (and do not in the same way accept Clement's letter) as an abiding source of guidance.

But how does it apply? I am taking hints from Pusey (the sermon is as often interminable). He takes the warnings earnestly, so much so that one might wonder whether there is any benefit in being a Christian. There are so many ways of failing. He is faced with many nominal Christians, who are willing to be present at morning and evening prayer provided they are not expected to believe the creed or reform their lives too much. He knows this is not proper following of Christ and they are in grave danger. He would have them believing communicants. Yet he knows he must warn about the dangers of unworthy receiving even as he commends the sacrament to them. His purpose, like that of Paul, is to encourage. We may wonder how well he achieved that purpose.

There is no point in being an “almost Christian” (the idea comes from John Wesley). Avoiding the faith and its consequences, while having even a suspicion that these might be God's will, is a form of dishonesty. This is quite different from the fate of those who do not and cannot know the faith and who simply strive to do the best they know. God will be generous to them (Paul's assessment, not just mine). But “irretrievable ignorance” cannot be contrived.

It is true (in the words of one of very few possibly genuine sayings of the Lord not found in the scriptures) that “he who is near me is near the fire”. Or in the words of the reading “let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall”. But our conclusion must be hope, because we have God's promises. “We might have shrunk from coming to the all-holy Mysteries, but that our Saviour saith, 'Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His Blood, ye have no life in you.' Come then we must; and so, though with trembling hearts and faint steps, mistrusting ourselves, but trusting in GOD, we will come. We should mistrust our own weakness, but we should not mistrust God's strength.” (Pusey)