

Sermon Notes for Quinquagesima

“*now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three*” (epistle)

St. Paul did *not* teach that “all you need is love”. It is a little nearer the truth that he taught that you needed faith, hope and charity (it is safer to keep what I know is a bad translation rather than give credence to worse misunderstandings) though in heaven (but not on earth) only the last will persist because the others have completed their task. In heaven we know God (as far as we can), so there is no uncertainty; and we know we can trust God, so there is no possibility of distrust. In heaven all the promises of God have been achieved so there can be no hope. (I pass over the transitional situation before the End; before all is accomplished, there is still a sort of hope about *how* it will be accomplished, though hardly a doubt for those already in heaven that it *will* be accomplished.)

Anyway, we are on earth and “*now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three*”. If we get these wrong, we are not going to make a good job of being Christians. This is a concerning truth for the original candidates for adult baptism at Easter. No bad thing if we put ourselves alongside them, as was probably already the major purpose when this reading was chosen for this Sunday.

Notice that St. Paul goes for internal and individual characteristics. He was writing to a Christian congregation, and so the social realities of the Church are not in point here (even though this passage takes its rise from the social problems of living together under the Spirit). Given that we are members of the Church, he argues, what characterises the Christian life? Not the inherently passive, one might think, experience of the Spirit (though that was obviously far more important to his hearers than it is to us, for good or ill), but these active and individual virtues which we will or will not practice every day.

For St. Paul did not imagine faith, hope and charity were internal cultivations with no practical outcome. There is much less between St. Paul and St. James than vulgar minds (such as Luther) imagine. It is perfectly obvious that charity is in this passage about how a person *behaves* – it is an *achieved* life-style not just an attitude of mind. I think that is also true of faith and hope. These are not mere opinions which we “should” strive to convince ourselves we have. Faith is about how you live because God gives value to your life. Hope is about the choices you make because God is *not* a “gentleman” and so *does* “keep his word”. St. Paul expects the faithful to live a particular kind of redeemed life; most of the letters give particular instructions about this. There is no system, maybe, and only rarely (as in this passage) basic principles. But there is plenty of detail. It was for later times to attempt to complete the picture.

We from our own Christian formation may think of faith hope and charity as the “theological virtues” and add to them the “cardinal virtues” (and indeed the whole Aristotelian system of virtues). This is not the thought of the New Testament. The key Greek word hardly occurs; when it does (just once in St. Paul - “if there be any virtue and if there be any praise”), it is a rather vague commendation, not an appeal to a system. Now the New Testament is not a systematic theology, nor is it a comprehensive source for one. Nor is the Old Testament. If we are to express an excellent Christian life, we will perforce use some other sources to fill the picture out, probably philosophical ones. Aristotle then becomes a plausible authority, because of his humanity. So, for example, Thomas Traherne of my college in “The Way to Blessedness” tried to develop a Christian humanism in which the Aristotelian virtues, and some others purely Christian including the secondary but essential virtue of repentance, are blended. The result is not unattractive. It is certainly wiser than the sloppy call to “be like Christ” when we do not have His unique vocation.

So the call is to live our lives because of the reality of the relationship with God which He has given us. The potential, within the limits of humanity, is huge. The achievement is little, the temptation to despair great. St. Paul envisaged much more mutual support than we can now give each other. That is our problem. But the greater danger, perhaps inherent in talk of “virtue” is to see our failure as a problem of human weakness. We were never supposed to “do it ourselves”. Nobody should read today's epistle out of its context in chapters 12 to 14. St. Paul's starting point was not human potential and consequent duties but the way the self-giving of God by the Spirit was to be expected, not mainly in “gifts” but in the gift to be human. We come together is not least in the hope of that gift “to do all such good works as thou hast prepared for us to walk in.”