

Sermon for Trinity VII

“servants to God”

The biggest illusion of modern times is freedom. Let us be clear. Secular society will in some (increasingly few) aspects of life let you do what you like, and in that sense we say that there are some more freedoms here than there are, for example, in China. But all societies impose many restraints, and no society can exempt you from the consequences of your actions. Absolute freedom even in worldly life is a delusion. Is it any different in our life with – or without - God?

Now the Lord said “you cannot serve God and Mammon”, and today's Epistle is essentially a commentary on that. Even further back, Joshua had told the Israelites to choose who they would serve – the gods of the nations or the God of Israel. There is no room for “freedom”, and no room for any in-between situation – merely a choice of service. The choice is extreme, for the words in the Greek are not various forms of “service”, as the Authorised Version has it, but of slavery. So we can only choose our slave-owner? Some care is needed; the basic word normally means “slave”, but it does have an extended meaning more like “servant”. For us, that might be better rendered “employee”, since only lawyers think of the “master and servant” relationship nowadays.

Now in the secular world of employment we know that some people are able to convince the Inland Revenue that they are self-employed, but in the choice of life, which is what the Lord (and Joshua and Paul) set before us, you cannot succeed in being your own master; there is only a choice of masters. If you want to be free in the choice of life (self-employed, your own master) you have no reason in yourself for any choices, so you will in practice either drift or find you are accepting some desire or other which will give you a sense of direction. Which is the first step to slavery to it.

Now of course if you are somebody's employee (or slave), then no other employer (or slave-owner) can give you instructions within the sphere of your employment (or slavery). In that ironical sense, you are free from the others. Hence Paul says “when ye were the servants of sin, ye were free from righteousness”. If sin has got you completely, then there is no room left. This does not mean that you never do any half-decent thing. If the forces opposed to God (the world, the flesh and the devil, here summed up as “sin”) have you under control, they do not care about minor good deeds. And they keep their promises as employer – sin pays the due wages, and “the wages of sin is death”.

Christianity (according to Christ as well as Paul, and in the following of the Baptist) is a fundamental choice. In the Old Covenant, as we have seen, a form of that choice had also existed. The choice is always binary – either this or that. In the drama of adult baptism, it is expressed as a total rejection by the candidate of his slavery to sin. If he did not mean this, the sacrament proper (water and the Threefold Name) would not benefit him; it would only be a mockery.

I am following the same line of exposition as Newman: “If we will not be Christ's servants, we are forthwith Satan's; and Christ set us free from Satan only by making us His servants. Satan's kingdom touches upon Christ's, the world touches on the Church; and we cease to be Satan's property by becoming Christ's. We cannot be without a master, such is the law of our nature; yet a number of persons overlook it, and think their Christian liberty lies in being free from all law, even from the law of God.” Newman had extreme protestants in mind, who thought “faith stood instead of obedience”, that God did not want any form of Christian behaviour from the regenerate and indeed that it might be sinful to attempt it, as if earning the salvation which God gives. In what passes for Christianity nowadays, the error is mainly the invention of new obediences and rejection of the revealed narrow way – do what you like and call it “love”. We have not so learnt Christ.

There is then only the choice made for us in our baptism and affirmed in our confirmation. “Religion then is a necessary service; of course it is a privilege too, but it becomes more and more of a privilege, the more we exercise ourselves in it. The perfect Christian state is that in which our duty and our pleasure are the same, when what is right and true is natural to us, and in which God's "service is perfect freedom." And this is the state towards which all true Christians are tending; it is the state in which the Angels stand; entire subjection to God in thought and deed is their happiness; an utter and absolute captivity of their will to His will, is their fulness of joy and everlasting life.”