

Sermon Notes for Sunday Next Before Advent

“plenteously bringing forth the fruit of good works” (Collect)

“Homer sometimes nods”, and you might think that is also true of Cranmer – that he falls into translating mechanically rather than rethinking the collect in order to agree with his protestant convictions. Surely “good works” is one of the ideas he was trying to destroy? It is our duty to understand Anglicanism not just to have instincts about it. Now good evidence for theological thought acceptable to Cranmer is the Homilies (the 39 Articles as we have them are mostly later). So here is the beginning of the fourth homily “Of good works”. I modernise the spelling.

“THE life which we live in this world (good Christian people) is of the free benefit of GOD lent us, yet not to use it at our pleasure, after our own fleshly will: but to trade over the same in those works which are beseeming them that are become new creatures in Christ. These works the Apostle calleth good works, saying, We are GOD'S workmanship, created in Christ Jesu to good works, which GOD hath ordained that we should walk in them (Ephesians 2.10). And yet his meaning is not by these words, to induce us, to have any affiance, or to put any confidence in our works, as by the merit and deserving of them to purchase to our selves and others remission of sin, and so consequently everlasting life, for that were mere blasphemy against GOD'S mercy, and great derogation to the bloodshedding of our Saviour Jesus Christ. For it is of the free grace and mercy of GOD, by the mediation of the blood of his Son Jesus Christ, without merit or deserving on our part, that our sins are forgiven us, that we are reconciled and brought again into his favour, and are made heirs of his heavenly kingdom. Grace (saith St. Augustine) belonging to GOD, who doth call us, and then hath he good works, whosoever received grace.

Good works then bring not forth grace: but are brought forth by grace. The wheel (saith he) turneth round, not to the end that it may be made round: but because it is first made round, therefore it turneth round. So, no man doth good works, to receive grace by his good works: but because he hath first received grace, therefore consequently he doth good works. And in another place he saith: good works go not before in him which shall afterward be justified, but good works do follow after when a man is first justified. St. Paul therefore teacheth, that we must do good works for divers respects. First, to shew our selves obedient children unto our heavenly Father, who hath ordained them, that we should walk in them. Secondly, for that they are good declarations and testimonies of our justification. Thirdly, that others seeing our good works, may the rather by them be stirred up and excited to glorify our Father which is in heaven. Let us not therefore be slack to do good works, seeing it is the will of GOD that we should walk in them, assuring our selves that at the last day, every man shall receive of God for his labour done in true faith, a greater reward then his works have deserved.” So the Homily begins.

Nobody can earn a right relationship with God. And nobody can claim to have done more than is required, for “we are unprofitable servants”. But Anglicanism does not eviscerate the call of the New Testament to action (clear in both Gospels and Epistles), or its clear talk of reward for that action. This is already clear in Jesus' teaching to Jews; so much more does it apply to Christians.

The Christian should be found making generous responses to God (the Homily is actually about fasting) and also behaving generously to his neighbour. This is so much more than keeping within the limits of the moral law. This is the essential difference between the “thou shalt not” of the Ten Commandments and the Summary of the Law substituted in the 1928 Prayer Book and later forms.

The risk in these degenerate days is that Christianity will be reduced to kindness to other people, and that to a mere pleasantness towards them, or, if more, to giving them what they want whether it is right or not. Clearly this is not what the Homily could have in mind, for fasting, its actual subject, is a good work towards God and not man. (Unfortunately, the second part of the homily introduces some sub-Christian thinking about the pragmatic need to support the fishing industry!) The danger of these days is that our limited imagination will reduce good works to charitable giving. Which is indeed one of the “eminent Good Works”, but not to the neglect of Prayer and Fasting (the others).

So, since Advent is time for a fresh start in readiness for the Second Coming of the Lord, we should make ready the way for him by these three good works.