

Sermon Notes for Trinity XIII

“if there had been a law which could have given life” (epistle)

It is never a bad idea to remind ourselves of fundamentals. Superficially, many see it as obvious that Christianity is about rules. Every Sunday, the compilers of the Prayer Book of 1552 required the reading of the Ten Commandments to the assembled people (for if Communion was rare, the first part of the service was required). Many a Church had the Commandments (plus the Creed and Lord's Prayer) on tablets in the sanctuary. This was not actually an innovation of the Reformation, for Western primers and catechisms based their moral teaching on the Commandments – the Roman catechism still does. 1928 gave us the “summary of the law” instead, because it seemed the Commandments were too low a standard. But that summary still implied that Christianity involves keeping rules.

Now the Lord certainly taught morals, and he occasionally gave out a rule (for instance, against carrying anything in the Temple). He was starting from a basis which we have to reconstruct, and this is not wholly easy. The Old Testament was there and included much law (teaching). We think that the Five Books of Moses were read in the Jewish assemblies which we call synagogues, but there was no special prominence given to the Ten Commandments. And in practice there was much law which was only loosely related to the Old Testament. I doubt the ordinary observant Jew knew the law in any detail, just as the ordinary English subject does not (except by legal fiction) know the laws which bind him – yet both like to think (with some reason) that they do keep the law.

But didn't Paul explode all that? Actually, he lays down all sorts of rules, both on the Lord's authority and sometimes on his own, for the faithful. And he expels those who break the rules – hands them over to Satan, indeed. So we must be careful. He does not reject the very idea of law; his issue is much narrower. But it is of permanent importance (not just for “Judaizers”).

His point is that keeping rules brings the risk of thinking that we can buy a relationship with God thereby. There is a “covenant”; we might think it looks like a contract; then if we keep its terms, still more if we exceed them, we have rights. This is a mistake. The Lord himself gives one corrective – at best, we are “unprofitable servants” (see Article XIV). We do not do enough. The history of Israel is basically one of sin. God does not at any stage rescue his people because they are virtuous, or even repentant, but out of respect for himself (so that his name be not mocked) and in spite of their deserts, according to Ezekiel.

Paul would argue that even Abraham had no “merits” for which God could reward him. It was right to abandon idolatry, but this is no more than stopping doing one wrong thing. The covenant was not an agreed contract or bargain, it was God's gift (or if you will imposition). What Abraham could do is trust that God is faithful – that He would do what he has promised – and try to live accordingly. These are the terms on which we have a relationship with God.

Paul is of course right that the relationship came first and the spelling out of some aspects of it in law came later, both in historical terms and in logic. Not but that the genuine laws (Paul and his Master both dispute particular later constructs) were binding on Jews. But they do not change the basic relationship.

Now there is a new covenant. In Christ the relationship is offered to everyone, not just to Jews. But on much the same terms. Man has not deserved anything. It is harmless to say that Christ has deserved or merited our salvation, but even that suggests that the Father had to be bought off in some way. Not so; it is because the Father loved us and wished for us to be saved that his Son was in the world. We are sons of God; that is by God's gift in Christ and not by any doing of ours. But we will make nothing of it unless we trust God means it.

Now some of the “reformed” drew the conclusion that since faith is fundamental (which it is) then it is wrong to do good works (in spite of plain words of scripture) or even to bother about our conduct. We must never behave (they thought) as if we might be trying to buy salvation. This is not the teaching of the Church of England. We will shortly pray that we may (assisted by God's grace) “do all such good works as thou hast prepared for us to walk in”. The Homilies detail some of them and that reform is no reason to stop. And not just good works. Article VII says that some aspects of the Law remain binding: “no Christian man whatsoever is free from the obedience of the commandments which are called Moral”. For God made man, and God cannot change his mind on what it is to be human, whereas he has ceased to require some ceremonial observances.

There are no surprises in fundamentals. Just the little help of appreciating that the Christian faith as we have received it is coherent.