

Sermon Notes for Trinity 21

be strong in the Lord (epistle)

There has been a danger for Christianity ever since the peace of the Church. It is to conform to the world; to become a moral influence with a tinge of religious observance, perhaps, but nothing of the power of true religion, which power is not by human contrivance but by being open to the Father's gifts. The problem is already apparent in some of the Homilies; it becomes more serious with the "deists" of the eighteenth century. It is the blasphemy of state school religion.

We have not so learned Christ. The Ephesians are not Christians to live decent lives in a safe environment. No, the environment is full of danger. Not because the emperor is Nero; Paul never suggests that, and we do not know how Nero's follies (which disgusted respectable faux-republican Rome) were noticed in remote provinces which he never visited. Rather because the world is subject to "powers of the air", demonic forces which harm us and obstruct access to God.

I have a little knowledge of Jewish intertestamental literature, and this is an interpretation of Genesis 6 which was developed in the Enoch literature and which was known to the Dead Sea group and to early Christians such as the author of Jude. "Modern man" is of course uncomfortable with it. I am more concerned that you accept the reality of evil than the detail of the myth. Paul in his turn takes the myth for granted; but that is not the same as taking it "literally" (a foolish idea because it is a product of bookish creativity!) Enough that there is a war in progress.

There is a war; we have chosen our side by renouncing "the devil and all his works", and not least "the vain pomp and glory of the world" which is the powers of the air in action; and so it is our duty "to confess the faith of Christ crucified, and manfully to fight under his banner against sin, the world and the devil, and to continue Christ's faithful soldier and servant" unto our life's end. I have quoted the baptism service at some length to establish that the Church of England takes on this analysis. The vows made in our name in baptism were expounded to us in catechism and renewed personally in confirmation. They are ours except in so far as we abandon the faith.

And so the advice is also for us. There is a war and we need the right equipment. I do not think there is a need to expound all the details which Paul gives; he was not studying any particular form of standard military issue, but gives applications rather as they occur to him. Those who want to study a working out of the imagery should consult the original version of Charles Wesley "Soldiers of Christ arise". Because the war is spiritual in origin, our needs are also spiritual. Rationality is no more use than material weapons.

Our needs are not solely defensive. True, temptation is a problem we have to face, and we do not know whether it arises purely from our own fallen state and weakness or from evil powers. Doubtless the one reinforces the other. Our duty is the same. But we are also expected – and this perhaps surprises – to attack. We have (or rather are called to use) "the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God". This is not a call to bible-bashing (if it were, it would perforce be only the Old Testament!) No, the Word is Christ. Compare Hebrews 4:12 – if the risen Lord is so potent to scrutinise us, how much more to unmask and frustrate the powers of evil. The tool is available. But we have to use it.

There is an environment of evil. That evil is both in us and around us, of which the "powers of the air" are an image. They are an obstacle between us and God. We – that is our prayers – have to fight a way through them. The ringing of bells in the eucharistic prayer was, I am told, originally connected with this, as the bells were thought to drive away evil spirits, so that our offering could be brought safely through their blockade to the altar on high, thence to return empowered by Christ's own eternal offering of himself. The bells are found before the complications of transubstantiation and in churches, such as the Copts, which do not have such a eucharistic theory. I do not like any practice which tends to suggest Christ's purposes for us can be blocked by inferior, created, beings – though of course evil whether in humans or others must impair and can frustrate those purposes, until there is repentance.

There is a place for Christian fantasy, but we must end practically. What do we lack? "Is it that the power of God is not within us? Is it literally that we are not able to perform God's commandments? God forbid! We are able. We have that given us which makes us able. We are not in a state of nature. We have had the gift of grace implanted in us. We have a power within us to do what we are commanded to do. What is it we lack? The power? No; the will." (Newman)