

Sermon Notes for Trinity XXI

“that ye may be able to withstand in the evil day” (epistle)

Military imagery is unfashionable in the contemporary church. I suspect Paul had comparatively little experience of soldiers until his journey to Rome, and even then, not of their function as guardians of the frontiers but more as the nearest Rome had to a police force. But he chose to use that imagery, and we pray for the Church “militant here on earth” because that is our condition. There is a war and we must surrender or fight. There is no middle course.

We are not committed to hold as an article of faith that each of us has a good and an evil angel assigned. That may be a useful picture; it is not so revealed. We are advised to recognise that evil is at work in the world, and is powerful. Paul indeed may be suggesting that evil powers exercise authority in this world, and in some way would block our access to God (as well as all the other harm they contrive). At present, their success in the “developed” world might be thought considerable, and the worst feature of that success is to persuade many Christians to acquiesce in the “values” of that world (and even applaud them).

But our business is only marginally with demonology. Our business is not to understand evil (beyond the need to recognise its various threats and not least the falsifying of the faith) but to receive the help we need and then to use it. “Be strong in the Lord, and in the power of his might” we are told. Not strong in ourselves. We are not. Christianity is not mere advice about what constitutes decent living, which is easy enough to do once we know it. Nor is it that plus a faint acknowledgement that there is a God. (This is why Bunyan puts Worldly Wiseman as the first threat to pilgrimage.) “If you wish, you can keep the commandments” (Ecclesiasticus) is so far forth true that without that wish nothing will be achieved. But the wish is not enough, nor is decent living. We are called to “perfect holiness” and we will not get very far without God’s help.

But of course that help is available. “Take unto you the whole armour of God”, we read. We do not have to devise our own weapons. God in his Son has taken us to himself, has died for us, and gives himself to us. If we will respond to what has been given, then “we may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand”. That is our vocation. It is important to add that this is not an individual matter; Paul immediately goes on to prayer for each other, because “we are all in this together”. We struggle not individually, but as the Church.

Many better preachers than I reach this point and have nothing more to offer than a call to make the choice and stick to it. As if it were only “a mighty effort of will”. But we all know it is not as easy as that. Better indeed to make the choice in conscious recognition that we need and will always need God’s help than to imagine we can do it by ourselves. We have that help, however hard it may be to discern that help in ourselves. (It *may* be possible to be so thorough an apostate that we have lost that help without hope of recovery; but to do so requires a very clear and extreme choice – mere apathy is not enough.) But weakness of will is the general problem, whether in choosing God or rejecting him. The risen Christ has no ultimate place for the lukewarm: “I would that thou wert cold, or hot”. These are not comfortable words; but the end is still hopeful: “As many as I love, I reprove and chasten: be zealous therefore and repent”. And this is also a truth in Hebrews; that we suffer God’s discipline proves we are legitimate children, not illegitimate ones outside the inheritance. Analytically, it may seem impossible to recover. Practically, we do not know. So we are to struggle on. Daily repentance, daily prayer for help, is what is required of us (hence the Lord’s Prayer). We will never be great warriors for the Lord. But still we daily renew the effort.

I mentioned earlier that this is a social as well as an individual effort. We do not struggle alone. Our own body is small, yet we pray for each other. We did not leave the state religion in order to be separate, but in order to join with all the faithful, so far as might be possible. We never had a vocation of separation, but of unity.

Newman on this passage reminds us that it is not our own strength, but the grace given us: “We are regenerated in order that we may be renewed daily after the Image of Him who has regenerated us. ‘Be strong in the Lord,’ says the Apostle, ‘and in the power of His might’. One grace and then another is to be perfected in us. Each day is to bring forth its own treasure, till we stand, like blessed spirits, able and waiting to do the will of God.”