

Sermon Notes for Trinity XXIV 15-11-2015

“partakers of the inheritance of the saints in light” (Epistle)

The Epistle describes a wonderful condition. But I fear we have to call linguistic philosophy as well as theology to our aid. What is the status of this condition? Do we have it? Or is it a promise? What do we have to do, if anything? A nineteenth century dispute still current turns on this problem, for the Free Church of England denies that “regeneration is inseparably connected with baptism”. Yet the Prayer Book baptism service requires the minister to say “Seeing now . . . that *this child* is regenerate”. What are we to believe?

I spare you the blow-by-blow account of the dispute. One fact was obvious then. The jails were full of baptised Christians! If regeneration was a new birth and was inseparably connected with baptism, then it offered no certainty of living out that new birth. If our instinctive answer is to prefer adult baptism of the convert, as in the early church, to general infant baptism, Spurgeon reported that not a few of those who had received believer's baptism from him had turned out bad.

The wisest analysis came from Mozley. We hope the child is regenerate, we plan to do all that we can to favour growth in the Christian way; that is, we may say, the natural outcome; but the words can be no more than our reasonable aspiration for the child. We have done what we can, and “children which are baptized, dying before they commit actual sin, are undoubtedly saved.”

But that is not our case. We sin, but, we trust, not beyond recovery. “Not every deadly sin willingly committed after Baptism is sin against the Holy Ghost, and unpardonable”. “We may depart from grace given, and by the grace of God we may arise again, and amend our lives”. (Article 16) This is the teaching of the Church of England, and the Prayer Book requires confession and absolution in all the regular services. It denies that there is any absolute security (contrast Calvinism) as if either the believer could not sin or that it would not make any difference if he did. We are on the way of safety; we hope, but do not know, that we will persevere to the end of the way.

Paul does not actually suggest that all the promises belong to his hearers at once. “We do not cease to pray for you” - so the perfection of the Christian life is not their irretrievable possession. There is more to be given. They have much to gain, his prayer suggests; in knowledge, in behaviour, and in the receiving of God's help. Indeed, the “inheritance of the saints” is not a static possession but a path of growth. His desire is that “ye might be filled” (and so are not yet completely filled).

Perhaps one may compare the Lord's teaching about when the wicked spirit is gone out of a man. Yes, the man is a chamber “swept and garnished”, but, so far forth, empty and so vulnerable. Either evil will return in greater strength, or God must be received there, and ever more completely. Baptism (which used to include the exorcising of any evil spirits and still implies the repudiation of evil in all its forms) is indeed the beginning. But it cannot be the completion (even when we take the baptismal promises upon ourselves in confirmation).

We have just celebrated All Saints, and might note how 1928 set up a supplementary commemoration of Church of England saints on 8th November – but did not identify any of them! There is a serious problem here, whether Anglicanism is “neither cold nor hot” - whether it prefers a (quite good) mediocrity such as is found in William Law's “Serious Call” to Christian perfection as held out as an aspiration by John Wesley. We are all called to be saints. “Be ye perfect” is an inadequate rendering of the Lord's words, for it suggests a merely moral perfection, which so easily becomes a list of sins not committed (like a Pharisee?) Better “be utterly dedicated”. Not to an ever-increasing set of “religious” duties. That too is a displacement activity. But to the achieving of God's purpose in “that state of life, unto which it shall please God to call me”. It is both the virtue and the danger of Anglicanism (granted Law was a non-juror and Wesley a methodist) that it places our possible sanctity firmly within the “common things of life”.

Yes, there was Anglican complacency, and it not our vocation to continue it. God will always be demanding more of us; the new birth is not complete in this life. Everything turns on our response. As Wesley put it: “This is the highest point: not only to know, to do, to suffer, the whole will of God; but to suffer it to the end, not barely with patience, but with thankful joy.”