

Trinity XXIII

“our citizenship is in heaven, from whence we look for the Saviour” (Epistle)

Saint Paul does not mince words. “Be followers together of me” because if not you will be followers of those who are “enemies of the cross of Christ”, no less. Now I do not think these the embittered atheists who mock us, nor the ardent secularists who go to law to get the cross banned from public places, nor even those who will ban prayer for those with unwanted sexual feelings. God will judge them for their inhumanity, but they are not meant here. To be an enemy of the cross, you must in some sense have been within the faith. Paul might have been thinking of the Jews of his time, because the crucifixion had happened at their most solemn feast and because they ought to have understood it. (This has less if any application to Jews now.) But more likely he was thinking of renegade Christians. We do well to compare Hebrews 6.4-6, *“those who were once enlightened . . . and then fell away . . . seeing they crucify to themselves the Son of God afresh, and put him to open shame”*.

This is not about the many who in our time have merely drifted from weak faith to weak doubt to nothing. It is about the genuine apostates. They do exist. It was a presiding “bishop” of the American episcopalians who declared our salvation to be an “individualist heresy”, and the current regime there still drives out the orthodox in faith and morals and affirms every sinner. Maybe apostasy has not yet reached this stage in the Church of England, but there are certainly those who wish to follow in that path. (This is not about women priests, or bishops. It is possible to think you are such and yet to be orthodox on the great truths of the faith and morals.) So there is a real evil abroad amongst those who call themselves Christians. Some have sold out to the god of this world. We must be wary of them.

But Paul deals in contrasts. They “mind earthly things”. (Compare the sad story of Demas who “left us, having loved the world” in 2 Timothy 4.10.) They belong in the “secular” world as organised, and increasingly consciously organised, against God. We don't. “Our citizenship is in heaven.” (“Conversation” in the Authorised Version is a bad mistranslation.) This was a telling point to his readers, many of whom did not have any earthly citizenship, being either slaves or resident aliens (immigrants, we might say). All the more telling in Philippi, a Roman colony, so that those without Roman citizenship knew they were outsiders in the very town where they lived. We do not know how long it will be before we share their experience of practical exclusion (while still remaining in law British subjects). But the more important aspect is the positive – we, who have been saved, already have “another country” of which we are citizens. “Your life is hid with Christ in God” (Colossians 3.3).

In heaven, because Christ has “unlocked the gate of heaven and let us in” - that is what his resurrection and ascension does. We *already* belong. Eternal life is not something which starts at death. Heaven is not a spatial location – it is often simply a reverent way of referring to God without naming him. Saint Paul is not much given to that reverence, but even so the point of heaven is that it is the place of God's presence. We have been admitted to that presence – it is for us to make use of the privileges which we have been given, which we do in prayer and by living a life devoted to God. Which we can do, because it is God himself, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, who is in us to make it possible.

“From whence also we look for the Saviour”. Advent will soon be upon us, and is a time for prayer for our Lord's return in glory, to perfect the work he has begun. In him, the Transfiguration of the body is already complete; for us, it is to come, when “we shall be fashioned like unto his glorious body”. Advent is also a time for hope. We know, not completely, how much is wrong with us. We are not perfect Christians. We are subject to all the temptations of the world, and we know, in proportion as we are alert, how much we fail. But the triumph will be the Lord's, both in ourselves (we pray) and over the world which crucified him, which tried and failed to defeat him, and which will in its turn be defeated utterly. “Even so come, Lord Jesus.”