

Sermon Notes for Lent I 17-02-2013

“that the ministry be not blamed” (epistle)

The Epistle may seem to have little connection with Lent as we understand it. St. Paul gives us a heroic picture of the standards which he sees as required of the ministry as he practised it. This is curiously poignant in the light of the resignation of Pope Benedict. Here was one who recognised those standards as binding, and here is the consequence – he knew he could not continue to meet them (if he could ever have done so) and so he resigned so that another might better meet them.

Now there was a time when all Christian ministry was seen as a task for life, in which everybody died “in harness”. Modern rationalism (but also modern medicine) has brought us to assume that priests, and bishops, and now even popes, will usually become too frail, too exhausted, and so should resign. I do not know whether this is an improvement – perhaps it was wiser when arrangements were made to support ministers in their decline, rather than to replace them. The irony is that in secular society we have just abolished compulsory retiring ages – and the shortage of clergy in many jurisdictions means that priests have to continue long after they are exhausted.

The important truth is that the Christian ministry is not and must not be a status to which one clings. It is always a service to the people of God, and the Pope in examining himself and his ability to serve before God has certainly asked the right question, however much we may be saddened by the answer. The Church cannot depend on the survival in office of any man, whatever the needs, whatever his abilities, but on the continuing gift of the Holy Spirit. If we do not trust the Holy Spirit, we have already negated the possibility of Christianity.

Generally and in spite of St. Paul the Church does not expect its ministers both to support themselves and to exhaust themselves in the ministry. Paid clergy was a major theological change which we largely take for granted; comfortable clergy (as was once the case for some in the state religion) a consequent further change, though now largely reversed. With paid clergy went expert clergy – gone are the days when any layman might be chosen Presbyter or Bishop, now the norm is the graduate and seminary trained individual. These changes are probably more significant for the life of the Church than celibacy (where required). Were these changes worldly wisdom? As we face the collapse of the faith in Europe, we will have to question models of ministry which are not very much New Testament or primitive, and which may no longer be functional.

Who cares what we think? Sadly, that is true. If we have experience of trying something different, it will only benefit the wider church if we are visibly part of that body. Which seems impossible. Yes, but we should not despair of God's ability to make something out of nothing.

I have concentrated so far on the ministry, because that is St. Paul's subject. But surely this passage must have something to say to the people of God, else why use it in so conspicuous a place as the first Sunday of Lent? I doubt those who chose it were seeking to rouse the people to sympathy for the clergy! Maybe they realised that the sharp distinction between the Sacred Ministry and the laity which is routine from the second century onwards is less clear in the first. St. Paul never intended to let anybody off – most of what he says applies to all the faithful just as he applies it not merely to himself but to all the Apostolate. In current society, persecution is more likely to be suffered by the Christian in employment than by the paid cleric. The opportunities for works of charity and for evangelism are common to both. The duty of prayer rests on both, granted differences in forms (in Anglicanism, the clergy are obligated to daily Morning and Evening Prayer, the people are not). So we do not err in using the epistle as a challenge, as a basis for self-examination. For Lent is not mere abstinences (which we might do and others will do for worldly reasons), but a time to deepen our commitment to God. A duty which applies to us all and always.

St. Paul envisages what he knows – the fairly small, tight-knit (if given to faction) body which meets frequently and which is bound to be largely on its own (apart from visits and letters from himself and others like him). We are perforce much more Christians in isolation, lacking even the local body. This is not a usual situation, but God has blessed the solitary vocation in the past, so even if it is not what we want or believe ourselves called to fulfil, we must not assume nothing Christian can be made of it. In Lent or out of it, there is only one Christian obligation, to open ourselves to God's calling every day – to seek that calling, and, when received, to follow it.

The readings are those of the Prayer Book for the Sunday.