

Trinity I 25-05-08

“the spirit which he hath given us” (Epistle).

The epistle recapitulates topics from Whitsun and Trinity . Perhaps human suffering makes the gospel reading seem more immediately pertinent; but, unlike the rich man, we have also had to learn how little we can do to help in some cases. We may be punished in the next life for the opportunities to do good which we did not take; we may even have to face some consequences of our (comparative) wealth in this life; we will not be punished for the opportunities which we never had in the first place.

Anyway, back to the epistle reading. Christianity is not a new set of rules; the Lord in his earthly teaching was not giving new rules but urging his hearers back to the point behind the existing Jewish rules – that they are the practical expression of how to be loyal to the Father in heaven. For us Gentiles after the resurrection this is inevitably somewhat complicated. We don't take on all the Jewish rules; we distinguish between “moral” and “ceremonial” rules (which the church even in the New Testament period decided were not binding on Gentile converts), and even with moral rules we interpret everything through Jesus – through the way in which he made sense of the rules.

It is a mistake, indeed, to reduce Christianity to “we think that there is a god and that therefore we ought to be good”. This happens to be bad philosophy and is easily mocked by our enemies. (I would note in passing that atheists and humanists have no coherent basis for choosing any way of life over another, but that is another sermon.) It is much nearer the truth to say that because God has put us in a relationship with himself, therefore it is natural that we will choose the conduct which affirms that relationship.

What is that relationship? Bishop Gore's summary of this passage is *“Inasmuch as religion is fellowship with God, and in Christ God has revealed his essential character as love, so love – a love like Christ's – is the essence and test of true religion.”* You have doubtless heard me warn you before that “love” here is not about liking or emotional warmth, but about caring shown in actions. This is true of God before it is true of us. Gore summarises: *“the presence of love is proof of the presence of the Spirit of God, and the presence of his Spirit is the guarantee of the mutual indwelling of God and us.”*

The key to the passage, because it is essential to the very nature of love, is the way it is all written in the plural. This is not about “me” alone and “my” relation to God. Christianity was never other than social, even “our sins” in this passage. If love does not work out in our lives – and particularly in our life together as the Church – then how can we be loving God, and why should we believe he is loving us? Sadly, purely practical reasons mean that this congregation has little time to spend together, little opportunity to function as a loving unity. God will not judge us for the impossible, but we have to strive to compensate, by prayer for each other and for all the brethren throughout the world. The church which is happy to be isolated, even if it is a large body, even if it is a national body, has mistaken its duties.

What does this passage tell us of God *in himself*? Perhaps very little, in spite of the occurrence of the terms Father, Son and Spirit. *“The vision of God as he is has never been within the capacity of man”* (Bishop Gore again). We do not understand *what it is to be God* – only God knows that. We know God in his dealings with us. This is not a new idea, it is what the early Church called the “economy”. That is God's generosity, in creating and sustaining the universe (including humanity); in becoming one with us, so as to rescue us from that separation from God and from all other goods into which not only humanity but also the created order falls; in binding us together with himself lest the relationship falls apart. This is one work of one God. There is a tendency to attribute creation, redemption and sanctification to the three persons severally, as is done in the Catechism. This is not false, but should never be taken to the point of imaging internal conflict within the Trinity. It is not true, for instance, as some protestants taught, that the Father is angry with us but the Son satisfies his anger somehow. It is because God loved and loves the world (and even humanity within it) that the Father, Son and Spirit work together to rescue us, and, if they will, all humanity.