

Trinity XIII

“the Scripture hath concluded all under sin” (Epistle)

Nobody finds today's Epistle very easy to understand, and the Authorised Version makes it impossible. Some of the problem is that St. Paul is packing a lot of argument into a small space.

We can look elsewhere for help. His point is not much different from that of the parable of the Pharisee and the Publican (Luke 18). The suggestion which Jesus makes is that the Pharisee trusts he is in a right relationship with God because he keeps various observances. (These observances went beyond what many Rabbis held to be obligatory as part of the law of Moses, but that is a side issue.) There is pride in this, though a minimum of humility in that the Pharisee, so far as words go, gives thanks to God for it. The Publican knows he is not in a right relationship with God and asks for mercy (it is implied that he is a Jew, a member of the chosen people, and desires that relationship). Jesus says that God brought him into the right relationship (justified him) and that the Pharisee was mistaken in trusting he was already in that relationship.

I don't want to labour the point, but it is a hazard for all long-standing Christians, and perhaps for Continuers more than some others, to drift into the posture of the Pharisee without fully realising it. We cannot by our observances (however appropriate) bring ourselves into a right relationship with God. We will always fall short of the glory of God. We will always fail to make a complete response to God's love. We are “miserable sinners” (that is, not unhappy, but needing God's mercy). The emphasis which the Prayer Book gives to confession and absolution is wholly appropriate.

So the heart of Christianity is not “do all the right things and you will be alright”. It is to pray to God, on the basis of our need and his generosity.

Jesus gives a parable, St. Paul gives an argument. It is not for us to dispute which is the better approach! The argument is textual, that is, it takes the Old Testament for granted as evidence, not least because this is common ground with his opponents. God has set up a relationship with his people by promise (by sheer gift to Abraham, who had done nothing to deserve it) and not by any form of agreement. The complex of laws given to Moses is not capable of changing that relationship, which would be a revoking of the promise – and God does not go back on his word.

That complex of laws is a temporary practical help. It comes later, and it is communicated in a manner which demonstrates that it is less important. Not God himself, but two stages of separation from him – first the angels as God's messengers, and then Moses as mediator – come between God and the people. Not even the Ten Commandments (and there is little evidence that Judaism gave them a status higher than the rest of the Mosaic laws) have enough authority to change the basis of the relationship with God from his promise.

The Galatians, I think, found keeping laws rather attractive, just as the Pharisee did. This is a perennial temptation. In UK accountancy, however many rules there are, the overriding obligation to give a “true and fair view” may *require* an accountant to break any one of them. So in the Church. We may produce practical rules of thumb (see the Catechism). We do believe that some behaviours have been and always will be forbidden us. But we know that the Lord would not rest content with the mere avoidance of specific sins and performance of specific duties; no “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart and with all thy soul, with all thy mind and with all thy strength . . . and thy neighbour as thyself”. For mere keeping laws is an excellent way of keeping God at a distance. God's terms are not an act of obedience here and there, however many (613 commandments, the Rabbis said); he wants not just our acts of obedience, but us. And he gives us, not rules, but Himself.

Thank God, but not that we are “not as other men are”. Thank God for all that he has achieved in us, in accordance with his promises made to Abraham and perfected in Christ. Pray for his gift of discernment, that when God gives us a situation in which to act, as he gave to each of the three passers-by in the Gospel, we do not neglect it (and certainly not, as might be thought of the priest and levite, because of merely ceremonial rules). Pray, and pray earnestly, that he will complete his work in us “*that the promise by faith of Jesus Christ might be given to them that believe.*”