

Sermon Notes for Trinity XIV

the flesh lusteth against the spirit and the spirit against the flesh (Epistle)

Saint Paul is presumably describing what it is to be a Christian to fairly recent converts. They have not entered a life of bliss. Neither should we expect it. They have (in more prayer book terms) renounced Satan and all his works and declared allegiance to Christ. But their troubles are not over. Baptism is a choice (at least, it was in the days of adult baptism when it was dangerous to be a Christian). Increasingly, we must expect to receive converts and to guide them into adult baptism. We may have been baptised as infants; we may have made little conscious choice even in confirmation; but to live out our baptism (both renunciation and allegiance) involves cost.

Saint Paul pictures internal conflict. "Flesh" and "spirit" are not to be twisted into body and soul with the implication that only the latter "really" matters. Nor is he a primitive psychologist. He is aware that the human pressures which we call temptation will remain a problem. Not that we will be tempted in all the ways he mentions; but one way or the other there is a constant pressure.

Note that I have assumed an ambiguity in the text. I do not think that the whole passage should be read in terms of the Holy Spirit and our response to Him. But some of it undoubtedly has that meaning. This is not a simple piece of "two ways" moralising. Indeed, a very similar list of "works of the flesh" is found in the "Teaching of the Twelve Apostles", and in that document, which is not much more recent than Galatians, the way of death is contrasted with the "way of life" as if there is a simple binary choice. But that is not Saint Paul's meaning.

Rather, there is a way of life which is summed up as "spirit" because it consists of being open to being "led by the Spirit" and so receiving the "fruit of the Spirit". That is our calling; but we do not escape the works of the flesh so easily.

Choice between two ways is far older than the first century. It is implicit in the Old Covenant and spelt out in Deuteronomy. But it was never the case that the two ways were equal. One is right and the other wrong. One is a way and indeed The Way, the other is not so much a choice as a continued drift, less a way than a no-way. One way receives God's help; as for the other, the devil may or may not bother specifically to tempt; such intervention may not be necessary.

We have made our choice. We may well be self-critical, and judge how mediocre our response to the Spirit is, how little there is to show for so many years of discipleship, "many a conflict, many a doubt". But still we are on the Way.

"They that are Christ's have crucified the flesh, with the affections and lusts." It would be so pleasant if we could claim that victory. But we cannot. If we could, then the analysis "ye cannot do the things that ye would" would cease to apply. It won't. Remember how Saint Paul asked to be delivered from the "thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to buffet me, that I should not be exalted overmuch" and how the Lord refused, saying "my power is made perfect in weakness".

Saint Paul is perfectly realistic about the Christian condition. There is no empty enthusiasm, no promise of cheap immediate bliss for the redeemed. The way to shine in heavenly glory is "we feebly struggle". This does not condone lack of effort; Saint Paul remains a moralist, albeit in the form of commending virtues rather than requiring obedience to rules.

We do not have the temptation to fall back on the rules of the Jewish law, the Torah. We may have the temptation to fall back on whatever the secular world regards as decency. Sometimes, mainly on trivial matters, it is right so to conform; but this is not at the heart of being "led by the Spirit".

"This passage of St. Paul is an alarming one, for it speaks of a conflict and struggle between the Spirit of God within us and our natural mind, which struggle many never think of making at all, but live according to the desires of the mind, as if there were no war to be waged with ourselves. But more than this, for he describes the only way of salvation to be that of being victorious in this struggle; for the works of the fleshly mind and of the Spirit are so utterly at variance that there can be no compromise, but the Christian, who is in the narrow way of life, is led by the Spirit so as not to fulfil the desires of the natural mind. He is not in the struggle or conflict, but having, through the Spirit, gained the mastery over his corruptions, he is in the way of peace. He is full of "love, joy, and peace," and is therefore abounding in all the fruits of righteousness. But now this is a state to which few Christians attain." (Williams commentary on the Epistle)