

Trinity XV

“a new creature” (Epistle)

St. Paul did not imagine that his letter would ever be copied, or why do something which could not possibly be copied – write a conclusion in his own hand? We tend to imagine that the early church was a hand-to-mouth organisation like ourselves, but throughout the letters we find reference to collaborators or scribes. We do well to imagine St. Paul as sometimes asking a colleague to work up an answer to a problem which has been raised, sometimes as dictating the answer himself, almost always depending on a secretary to work up the result into a fair copy, which might then be checked and corrected. This is no solitary genius, but a Christian team. That said, the end product has St. Paul's authority and is sent under his signature. But here is the exception – a passage written personally, not in the tidy hand of a professional scribe.

It matters profoundly to St. Paul, but does it matter to us? Obviously, not directly. We are not tempted to undergo circumcision and keep the Jewish law (while still believing that Jesus is the fulfilment of the promises). But the pattern never ceases. There is always a temptation, sometimes a persecution, to conform to some sort of law, to the latest “good thing”. Our current situation is odd only in this, that “political correctness” is both enforced and despised at the same time. St. Paul's personal words are for us as much as the Galatians.

“The cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world.” Our Lord is Christ, and not any human institution (for St. Paul the Roman empire). For “no man can serve two masters”, and we have made our choice. The “world” is society organising itself apart from the True God, for which “secular society” is a very apposite translation. And how can there be a more extreme sign of that separation than a particularly horrible form of public execution (which the Galatians might have seen for themselves)?

Neither I nor St. Paul is saying that Christians have a duty to implement a total separation. The issues are more nuanced than that – he discusses them in several passages in I Corinthians. But we must not be surprised if “society” makes some demands which we simply must reject.

“Neither circumcision availeth anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creature.” Here we are at the heart of the matter, and it is always useful to apply such texts against ourselves. The point is soberly repeated in the 39 Articles: *“They also are to be held accursed that presume to say, That every man shall be saved by the Law or Sect which he professeth, so he be diligent to frame his life according to that Law, and the light of Nature. For Holy Scripture doth set out unto us only the Name of Jesus Christ, whereby men must be saved.”* This is not to be read as damnation for all except Christians. Rather, what God achieves in them and for them will be through Christ, and not have been earned by their doing what they think is the right thing. But for us too, we will not be saved for thinking that Anglicanism at its best is a workmanlike form of Christianity, nor for thinking that our own breed of Continuing Anglicanism is the least foolish option available, nor by living these choices out. Each of these steps may be right (and I of course think they are) and yet everything be missing. For “*a new creature*” is required, and that is in Christ's gift.

This is how St. John Chrysostom expounds the conclusion of the passage.

“This our rule of life he calls “*a new creature*,” both on account of what is past, and of what is to come; of what is past, because our soul, which had grown old with the oldness of sin, hath been all at once renewed by baptism, as if it had been created again. Wherefore we require a new and heavenly rule of life. And of things to come, because both the heaven and the earth, and all the creation, shall with our bodies be translated into incorruption . . .

“The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit, brethren. Amen.” He says not merely, “with you,” as elsewhere, but, “with your spirit,” thus withdrawing them from carnal things, and displaying throughout the beneficence of God, and reminding them of the grace which they enjoyed. For to have received the Spirit came not of the poverty of the Law, but of the righteousness which is by Faith, and to preserve it when obtained came not from Circumcision but from Grace. On this account he concluded his exhortation with a prayer, reminding them of grace and the Spirit, and at the same time addressing them as brethren, and supplicating God that they might continue to enjoy these blessings, thus providing for them a twofold security.”