

Trinity XVI (07-09-08)

“that ye might be filled with all the fullness of God” (Epistle).

Christianity is very realistic. The Lord demanded many renunciations of his followers, and promised little in this life except with tribulations. It must have seemed – indeed it clearly did seem – much less trouble to be an observant Jew like the Pharisees. The issue, however, was not one of comfort but of truth. We all know that it would be a much easier life to be a practical unbeliever like the majority in this country, or at most a vague liberal, keeping the name of Christian but avoiding any true discipleship. But we accept the narrow way and the harder path, for “Thou hast the words of eternal life” (see John 6:66-9).

Yet Christianity is not a religion only of remorseless obedience, a grim-faced following of what it is right however uncomfortable the consequences. We have hope, and that hope is grounded on God's own promises. Hope though we fail in in our discipleship. Hope even in this life, but much more in the next, that God will vindicate his truth.

“Church is the place where we learn what it is to be human”. So says a placard on a unitarian chapel in Cambridge, and I suppose we should be thankful for this testimony from outsiders! For if we are made in God's image, still more if we are brought into fellowship with him by his reaching out to us, we cannot possibly be human except by meeting together to reflect on these facts and to open ourselves to receive them, or rather Him.

This is a lengthy prelude to today's Epistle, maybe, but Saint Paul's experience of the third heaven is inseparable from his experience of weakness and suffering (2 Corinthians 12.2-10). This is reduced to a spiritual aphorism “no cross, no crown”. If we are to study glorious promises, this must be on the basis of our acceptance of discipleship and its earthly costs.

So then, we turn to the promises. If this reads like a devotional commentary rather than a sermon, so be it – at least you can study the text with these notes before you. A first warning – these are collective promises. Translations tend to mask this, but every occurrence of “you”, “your” and “ye” in this passage is plural – addressed to the Church collectively as met together. This is a truth of the whole of scripture, that we have it not primarily to be studied and applied individually (though this a legitimate practice) but to be recited to the glory of God in and for his assembled Church. It is because Christ dwells in the Church that the members of the Church will be caught up into the inner life of the blessed trinity, so far as that is possible. There is no individual salvation in Christianity, only “with all the saints” - and these are not a special group, but the ordinary body of believers.

St. Paul may not have worked out doctrine of the Trinity, but this passage shows the Spirit working in us to make us such that Christ can dwell in us and so we can make our response to God the Father. This is the Trinity in action towards us, equipping us for the full human life as God envisaged it in creation and still more in our re-creation.

What is the key to that life? Already, it seems, some people were addicted to the idea it was information or knowledge – basically, a mistaken science of the origins of the universe upon which was erected a fantastic theory of how to escape from it. St. Paul will have none of this. The key is not information but love – not an impersonal universe to understand or evade, but God who has already reached out to us in Christ. On the other hand, the rabbis often (not always) were taking a very restricted view of the scope of religion. The reference to the “breadth and length and height and depth” is to the restrictions which have been broken. We no longer confine ourselves to the mechanics of earthly obedience, forbidden to look before and beyond, but together “with all the saints” experience “all the fullness of God”.

The Fatherhood of God seems to survive in liberal theology as if it were the most obvious feature of religion. It wasn't (it is rare in the Old Testament and in contemporary Jewish thinking). St. Paul preserves the sense of surprise and joy that Jesus' innovative talking to God as Father, indeed as his own Father, is vindicated and is available to us. We do well to notice that it is only because all the promises have been fulfilled that we have the cheek to address God as “Our Father”. But that is our privilege as believers.

So what is Christian life? The final lines of a Communion hymn sum it up: “More blessed still, in peace and love to be One with the Trinity in Unity.”