

Trinity IV (05-07-09)

“the earnest expectation of the creation” (Epistle)

We are all somewhat given to a determined persistence in the faith under the worst of circumstances. This is a virtue, but it is not the only Christian truth. Today's epistle is a warning to the gloomy, that hope is a virtue and that God's triumph is inherent in the Gospel itself. Never exclude the possibility of joy!

Many of these sermons quarry other preachers both as a gift to you and as a resource for myself. Today I am using Charles Gore's 1899 practical commentary on Romans. Gore was (later) made Bishop of Worcester, Birmingham and finally Oxford before he resigned (just after the first world war) in frustration at his fellow-bishops, to pursue a preaching and teaching ministry.

“There are passages in the New Testament which are unique . . . And the passage just read about the groaning of creation in travail-pains is unique, not because there is not a good deal to elucidate it in other parts of the Bible, but because St. Paul in his treatment of common material strikes a note of sympathy with nature from nature's point of view, which is heard nowhere else in the Bible.”

For creation suffering as a consequence of human sin Gore quotes Genesis 3.17-19 and Isaiah 24.5-7. The whole created order is under a curse. But “the curse was not to be for ever. There was a good time to come – a new heaven, a new earth, wherein righteousness should dwell – 'a restoration of all things' and not merely of man, which should accompany the coming of the Messiah.” (Our knowledge of the Jewish hope in the first century has improved since Gore. The connection is not generally as close as that – but that is a long story.)

Still, what is promised is “a renovated world for a perfected humanity. And in his (St. Paul's) representation of the present aspects of nature he strikes an extraordinarily modern note by exhibiting, as it were unintentionally, a deep and real sympathy with nature in her pain from her own point of view . . . He notes how much 'vanity' there is in nature – how much that is ineffective and disappointing, how much waste and sadness – by reason of the omnipresent law of corruption, dissolution and decay under which she is laid . . . But he has got an explanation of this universal pain which makes it tolerable to him. It is the pain which accompanies a birth. The pain, as in the case, of the woman, is to be justified by the issue . . . For there is a destiny for the whole material world which includes man. As man is to be perfected and spiritualized in body no less than in mind; so the whole man, perfected in glory, is to have his place in a world emancipated in like manner from failure and pain.” “Matter as a whole is to have an unending development like spirit, and a development with a justifying purpose of glory in it.”

There is a danger in all this, and Gore is aware of the risk of making nature into a person. Some modern environmentalists seem to convert the (defensible) “Gaia hypothesis”, that the earth may best be understood as a kind of self-regulating whole, into worship of nature and relative contempt for humanity. Now I think that when St. Paul asked “Does God care about oxen?” (1. Cor. 9.9) he was joking; yes indeed God does, but somewhat more for that other part of the brute creation, the Christian minister (and indeed the Christian church).

For we can pray, but nature can only exist. We think we know our needs, yet St. Paul 'besought the Lord thrice' that his great physical trouble might be removed from him, and was refused (2 Cor. 12.8) “We all know the imperfection of our prayers: how weak, how ignorant they are! And St. Paul consoles us with the belief in an intercession – perfect, all-knowing, divine – which supports and sustains and, we may say, includes ours.” Christ “dwells in us by his Spirit. Doubtless, then, dwelling thus by the Spirit in the body, Christ intercedes for us. This is the intercession of the Spirit, which is also the intercession of Christ – an intercession gathering up into one, and sustaining and connecting and perfecting, all the imperfect prayers of all the saints.”

Most of us have our bodily problems. What does St. Paul promise us? We are waiting for our adoption, which is not a mere legal transaction but “the redemption of the body”. We believe in “the resurrection of the flesh” (the Apostles' Creed as found in Holy Baptism in the prayer book).

The Epistle is Romans 8.18-23; the Gospel is Luke 6.36-42.