

Trinity VII

“*servants to righteousness, unto holiness*” (Epistle)

“Cursed is he that putteth his trust in man, and taketh man for his defence, and in his heart goeth from the Lord. Amen.” (the Commination)

The biggest folly of my youth was perhaps “man come of age”. Individually, if we try to think for ourselves it is almost inevitable that we will fall victim to one or other of the innumerable follies which are in circulation (probably without our knowing it). The truth of a large library (like the Bodleian) is that though it might somewhere have the truth in it, it inevitably contains more error, more folly, than a small library. This is even more true of the internet. “*Magna est veritas, et praevalerebit*” is indeed part of the Apocrypha (I Esdras 4.38) but we cannot use that as proof that truth will win. Perhaps in some cases, such as the practical application of some science, truth does establish itself and those who deny it reap the consequences. But this is not generally the case. Dame Folly is often more tempting than Wisdom (see Proverbs 9).

Now truth and obedience are connected. Those who think they can construct a truth for themselves would naturally choose to live according to that truth, though they would probably prefer not to talk of obedience but of common sense. But, as already suggested, they will generally slip into taking for granted somebody else's imaginings. As Keynes put it, the politician who imagines he thinks for himself will end up the slave of some defunct economist. George Crabbe's Tales include ‘The Gentleman Farmer.’ The hero resolves that he will not put up with any bondage. The orthodox clergyman, the orthodox physician, and orthodox matrimony represent social bondage in different forms, and he will have none of them. So he starts on a career of ‘unchartered freedom,’ ‘To prove that *he alone was king of him.*’ And the last scene represents him the weak slave of his mistress, a quack doctor, and a revivalist (note the chiasmus).

This is perhaps a long way to the Epistle, but so be it. St. Paul takes it for granted that independence is illusory; the issue is simply a choice of servitude. You will either serve God or Mammon (to use our Lord's terms), who is not just money but the multiform Spirit of the Age, the public face of life in rebellion from God, as practiced first by Satan. In St. Paul's terms, you will serve either God or the flesh, which is not just sexuality (though it includes *misused* sexuality) but the whole body of life organised without God. There is no middle course, no “man come of age”, only a choice of masters.

For those who first heard this letter, this was not a theological conjecture but a life (or rather two lives) they had experienced. Which is why the Lord's Prayer begins with a working out of our allegiance (we are allowed to call Him our Father, and pray for his complete triumph) and ends with the plea for protection from backsliding “deliver us from evil” (or “deliver us from the evil one” as the Revised Version translates – this is probably right as regards the Greek but less secure as regards the underlying Hebrew). For there are two lives, and if we do not persist with the one, we must fall back into the other and will earn our wage, for *the end of those things is death* (spiritual as well as bodily).

How do we know what *eternal life through Jesus Christ* is? As Gore (whose devotional commentary on Romans I am largely following here) puts it, the apostolic teaching is older than the New Testament and contains both moral teaching and religious motives. The church provides “a definite body of instruction, which is to form the life of each person who gives himself over to her loving discipline.” Either, in practice, we “keep the deposit” or we are falling back into that invention of our own morals and (to taste) “spirituality”, just as we now see in the state religion.

But I do not just exhort you to accept the True Way, a call which might just as easily be proclaimed in Judaism or Islam, with rival pretence to authority. *The gift of God is eternal life*. Holiness is not our achievement, but God's gift. Not our merits, but his consecrating of us all as priests for his creation, so that *ye have your fruit unto holiness*. Man “surrendered to God in faith . . . receives into his nature, through all its open portals, the inflooding tide of divine love; and enters, enriched and uplifted, into the life that is eternal, the life which he shares with Jesus, the life that is truly human and really divine.”