

Sermon for Mattins on the Fourth Sunday after Trinity, 16th July 2017

Romans 8:1-11, Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23 - Spiritual, but not Political

Last Sunday we had a wonderful time with Bishop Jo when she came to lead our celebration Eucharist and officially to open St Mary's Hall. When she first saw this pulpit - this splendid Jacobean pulpit - she said, 'Wow! What a pulpit! If I'd known how splendid it is - not six feet, but at least twelve feet above contradiction - I would have added a lot more to my sermon!'

Well, what Bishop Jo actually did preach seemed pretty good to me, and I'm sure if you were there, you'll agree. She based her message on the Collect for last Sunday, and its distinction between things that were 'temporal', like buildings, and things that are 'spiritual'. One was a vertical plane, looking up to heaven, and the other, even if it was pretty splendid, like our St Mary's Hall, was earth-bound.

Now today we are invited by St Paul to go into this spiritual/temporal thing more deeply. This great chapter 8 of his Letter to the Romans is the chapter, we often read from at funerals: it goes -

35Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?

.....

37Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us.

38For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come,

39Nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Before this passage, in chapter 7 is the bit of St Paul's teaching which I find rather reassuring, about how, although he knows what the right thing to do is, he gets led astray and doesn't do it: in other words, he may be a good man, trying to do the right thing, but he is only human. Being human means, at least partly, being open to temptation, being sinful. It reflects the story of the Fall, of Adam and Eve.

But then Paul contrasts that imperfect, earth-bound state with the spiritual plane, with being 'in the spirit', as he calls it.

5For they that are after the flesh do mind the things of the flesh; but they that are after the Spirit the things of the Spirit.

Or, as the New English Bible translates it,

Those who live on the level of our lower nature have their outlook formed by it, and that spells death; but those who live on the level of the spirit have the spiritual outlook, and that is life and peace.

This is similar to that other great Pauline funeral passage, from 1 Corinthians 15:

42 So also is the resurrection of the dead. It is sown in corruption; it is raised in incorruption:

43 It is sown in dishonour; it is raised in glory: it is sown in weakness; it is raised in power:

44 It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body. There is a natural body, and there is a spiritual body.

A spiritual body. St Paul was familiar with Greek philosophy, with Plato and Aristotle. Four hundred years before him, they had made a distinction between souls and bodies - the body was 'temporal', earth-bound, mortal: the soul was the essence of the person, it is what makes you, you: and there was a lot of discussion whether the essence of a person, (what it is that makes you, you), whether this essence, their soul, was immortal, could survive death just by itself.

Paul in effect rejected the idea of disembodied souls, at the end of that great passage in 1 Corinthians 15, that we know also from Handel's 'Messiah':

51 Behold, I shew you a mystery; We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed,

52 In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump: for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed.

So the spiritual life is not disembodied, not some ethereal idea in the mind of an abstruse philosopher. We know from Paul's Letter to the Galatians, chapter 5, what the 'fruit of the spirit' is, in contrast with the 'works of the flesh':

'... the fruit of the spirit is love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance ...'

When you look at that list, most of it is what you would expect from a list of 'spiritual' virtues: joy, peace, meekness, for example. However a couple of the items seem to me to be more practical things, things that involve actually doing things with other human beings: in particular 'love' and 'long-suffering' spring to mind.

And that seems to me to link St Paul's teaching with that of our Lord Jesus Christ. I don't think that Jesus actually thought in the same terms as St Paul. He didn't think in terms of a flesh and spirit dichotomy: instead he tended to talk about the devil, on the one side, and the kingdom of God on the other. Jesus was more of a doer than a thinker, at least as the gospel writers describe him. He healed the sick; he turned water into wine; he taught in the synagogue, he turned the money-changers out of the Temple, he fed the 5,000.

But most noticeably, Jesus was a servant. He upended his divine status, he humbled himself, he washed the disciples' feet. In all that benevolent, dynamic activity, Jesus never lorded it above people, even though he was higher than anyone,

'He humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross. Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name: that the name of Jesus every knee should bow..'

That's in St Paul's Letter to the Philippians [2:9-10]. So he wasn't Plato's 'philosopher king'. On the one hand he was 'gentle Jesus, meek and mild', the words of Mrs C. F. Alexander, that we sang in Sunday School: but on the other, he was a really brave man, a hero, willing to face any challenge, even death.

Does that take us anywhere nearer to finding out what it is to be 'in the spirit', to be spiritual?

Let's assume that St Paul's antithesis, of the flesh as against being of the spirit, and Jesus', as the kingdom of God against the wiles of the devil, are two perspectives on something similar.

The lists of 'works of the flesh' and 'works of the spirit' in Galatians look very like what in other places in the Bible would be called sins, on the one hand, and good works on the other.

So being spiritual looks more and more like a prescription for action, for good works. You might say that we don't earn salvation, by doing good works: instead God has saved us through his free gift of grace. All we have to do is believe. You don't actually have to do anything.

But that's not right either. Think what the Epistle of St James says.

14What doth it profit, my brethren, though a man say he hath faith, and have not works? can faith save him?

15If a brother or sister be naked, and destitute of daily food,

16And one of you say unto them, Depart in peace, be ye warmed and filled; notwithstanding ye give them not those things which are needful to the body; what doth it profit?

17Even so faith, if it hath not works, is dead.. [James 2:14-17]

So what would Bishop Jo have said, if she'd realised what a splendid pulpit we have at St Mary's - what would she add to her careful balancing of the spiritual with the temporal? Granted that the new Hall is not spiritual, but it's a temporal, earthly benefit: what must we do to ensure that the spiritual side is upheld too in our church?

I would suggest that this spirituality would, or rather should, manifest itself not just in contemplation, but in action: not in meekness or peace, (or rather not only in meekness or peace), but also in action, in love of our neighbour, active love, Good Samaritan love.

In our Parish Profile, published on the Diocesan website the other day, we describe our Christian tradition, here at St Mary's, as 'liberal catholic'. What that means is that we are Anglicans who are in the catholic tradition, tracing our church back to the Apostles, catholic, a word meaning 'universal', a church for all, inclusive and traditional. It is a type of Anglicanism which was started in the 1830s in the Senior Common Room of Oriel College, Oxford, and was preached from the pulpit of the University Church, St Mary the Virgin, just opposite Oriel on the High Street. It was called Tractarianism or the Oxford Movement, and it started with a sermon, the 'Assize Sermon', preached 184 years ago last Friday, on 14th July 1833, by John Keble, which he titled 'On National Apostasy'.

John Keble preached: *'What are the symptoms by which one may judge most fairly, whether or not a nation is becoming alienated from God and Christ? ... How may a man best reconcile his allegiance to God and his Church with his duty to his country, that country which now by the supposition is fast becoming hostile to the Church, and cannot therefore long be the friend of God?'*

John Keble was followed by John Henry Newman, Pusey and other notable theologians. Newman would eventually convert to Roman Catholicism. But the Anglo-Catholic, Tractarian, movement within the Church of England became a major spiritual revival. And you must note that at its heart, this revival, although it was chiefly spiritual, could also be political. Where the state was perceived not to be operating in a Christian way, the Tractarians were prepared to challenge the politicians, as Keble had done in his Assize Sermon. The established Church and the State can't avoid each other. They mustn't. I believe that is still true today.

A real hallmark of the new Anglo-Catholic churches was their social concern. Just as I have tried to show how being 'in the spirit' really involves action, loving care, and service: being a servant like the Servant King, not just passive piety, so the Anglo-Catholics became great social workers. They founded missions among the poor in the East End of London, where they did not just look after the spiritual needs of the people, but also their temporal hunger. They started schools and libraries: they started the forerunners of our food banks.

So if we seek to be in the tradition of the Anglo-Catholics - and I believe that, for example, Revd John Waterson, the legendary Rector here for over 30 years till the 1970s, would have said that he was one - I think that as we follow Bishop Jo in her quest for spiritual gifts as well as temporal blessings, like the Hall, we need to start on the action items which our Vision Day identified, and in particular we need to start to look seriously at our care for our neighbours, our love for our neighbours.

We already support the Foodbank. Putting on my Foodbank manager's hat for a moment, I can thank St Mary's for all sorts of valuable support. As well as generous food and money donations, three of the four Foodbank trustees, and several more of our volunteer staff, come from this church.

But what else ought we to get involved in? What about welcoming refugees? Should we support Elmbridge CAN, our local refugee support group? There will soon be three Syrian refugee families living in the borough. They will need support in all sorts of practical ways.

Or should we take a leaf out of the Anglo-Catholic history book, and find a parish in a deprived area with whom we could make a partnership, so some of our wealth and abundance could be shared?

These are some of the ideas which I think we must start looking seriously at, if we are to take on the vision which we developed with Revd Steve Cox when he visited us. I think that we'll be trying to assemble a new committee - of course, you can't do anything in church without a committee - to become a kind of 'delivery group' for the ideas for community involvement from the Vision Day. If you'd be interested in getting involved, please do let me know.

I do hope Bishop Jo, and the spirit of John Keble, would both approve!

Amen.

Hugh Bryant