

Sermon for Evensong on the 13th Sunday after Trinity, 26th August 2018
Hebrews 13:16-21 - Make you perfect

'Now the God of peace, that brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the everlasting covenant, Make you perfect in every good work to do his will, working in you that which is wellpleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ'.

This lovely blessing comes from the letter to the Hebrews, from the end of our second lesson which Len read for us. It's often used at Easter time, and if you are a Methodist, as I used to be, you will be familiar with the blessing as it is the one used at the end of the communion service.

May God make us perfect. It's a really inspiring idea to go out with at the end of the service. May God make us perfect, perfect to do His will. I'm not quite sure how we would put that today: 'perfectly suited' to do it, perhaps.

The modern Bible translation in some of our other services [NRSV Anglicised Edition] says, '.. make you *complete* in everything good, so that you may do His will..', which isn't so memorable, and I'm not sure that it's any more understandable; because in normal speech today, we don't say we are 'complete' to do something.

We don't talk about being 'complete' people. 'The Compleat Angler' was the title of the famous book by Izaak Walton published in 1653, which subsequently went on to become the name of countless riverside pubs: 'The Complete [sic, 1760] Angler, or, Contemplative Man's Recreation' was the full title of the book. You can get an early edition, a 1760 one, printed 100 years after the original one was published, for the bargain price of £1,500, I see, on the Internet, at biblio.co.uk: but you don't have to pay such a lot, because it looks to be still in print, at much more modest prices.

The book title, The Compleat Angler, is the only use of the word 'complete' to describe a person that has occurred to me. You certainly might say that some *thing* was complete: my Hoover is complete with all its attachments. The spares kit in the boot of the car is complete. But I, a person, am not normally referred to as 'complete' in that sense. Tom Wolfe wrote a good novel called 'A Man in Full', published in 1998. The description 'in full', 'A Man in Full', has something of the same connotation as 'complete' has in the NRSV Bible.

Thinking about this prompted me to read the passage in the original Greek to see what this intriguing couple of sentences really says. It's very inspiring, particularly at the end of an uplifting service, to feel that, with God's help, we could be perfect. But does it really mean that?

The Greek word, *καταρτισαι*, is a word which means to ‘fully prepare’ someone or something, to ‘restore’ them, to put them in full working order. It’s not really the same as ‘perfect’, though - at least not nowadays.

Clearly the translators of the King James Bible (which is the version Len read from, the one we use for Evensong and Mattins), those three groups of learned scholars, used the word ‘perfect’ slightly differently from how we would use it today. They actually adopted, nearly word for word, the translation by William Tyndale just under 100 years earlier. Tyndale’s two editions, of 1525 and 1535, both used the word ‘perfect’: they said, ‘... *make you perfect in all good works, to do his will, working in you that which is pleasant in his sight...*’ In those days ‘perfect’ had a connotation of being ‘apt’ or ‘well-equipped’, as well as of being faultless.

These famous words in the Bible, in Hebrews, first written by Tyndale, link us right back to the time of the Reformation. William Tyndale was martyred because he dared to translate the Bible out of Latin into English. The Reformers, like him, Martin Luther and John Calvin, didn’t want there to be any barriers between the people and God in worship.

The idea, that only the priests could understand the words, was something that the Reformers were dead against. ‘Hoc est ... corpus meum’, the Latin for ‘This is my body’, in the Communion service, became ‘hocus pocus’. Hocus pocus - hoc est corpus. That’s what the ordinary people tended to think about it. Sacrament had become superstition. I do think that, if we let words just pass by unexamined, we might fall into the same trap.

Article XXIV of the 39 Articles reflects the Reformers’ intentions. Thomas Cranmer, who wrote it, was familiar with the work of Martin Luther, and may have met both him and Huldrych Zwingli, the great Zurich reformer. The Article is entitled,

‘Article XXIV: Of speaking in the congregation in such a tongue as the people understandeth.

It says:

It is a thing plainly repugnant to the word of God, and the custom of the primitive Church, to have publick Prayer in the Church, or to minister the Sacraments in a tongue not understood of the people.’

You can find Art XXIV on page 621 at the back of your little blue Prayer Book. As a small aside, you can look at the whole Letter to the Hebrews as another angle on the whole theology of priesthood. A lot of the Letter, its main theme, is taken up with discussion of Jesus’ position as a priest ‘of the order of Melchizedek’, which is an idea that only people steeped in the Old Testament, Jews or Jewish converts to Christianity, would understand.

The Jews never referred to God by name. God was the great 'I am', and anyone who met God face-to-face would be destroyed by the sight. Only the prophets and priests of the Temple could encounter God face-to-face and survive. And the Letter to the Hebrews goes into great detail in explaining how Jesus is indeed a true priest, with a direct line to God the Father.

Contrast that with the Reformation, Protestant, idea of the 'priesthood of all believers', (originally espoused by Luther and Calvin, following 1 Peter 2:9, which says, 'But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people...'), the belief that you didn't need a priest to stand between you and God. Any worshipper, any true believer, was his own priest. So in this earliest English translation, adopted by King James' translators, a Greek word which means to prepare or to restore - 'may the God of peace prepare you, make you up to the task' - which I suppose is a bit like being 'complete' in the sense of the 'Compleat Angler', fully qualified, fully prepared, becomes, 'perfect'. Make you perfect.

Perhaps I'm being too finicky about words here. Perhaps we do really know what it is to be made 'perfect in every good work to do his will'. But it's not all down to us whether we are 'perfect'. Whether we have 20-20 spiritual vision or not is a question of grace; God has either blessed us with it or He hasn't. There's another version of the Hebrews blessing which is perhaps a bit closer to our modern way of thinking and expressing what we mean. This is:

*'May Christ the Son of God perfect in you the image of his glory
and gladden your hearts with the good news of his kingdom'*

'Perfect in you' the image. Make *it* perfect. Not make *you* perfect, though. But in Hebrews it is a prayer for you: and it is to make you perfect. Not perfectly formed, necessarily, but perfectly equipped.

So let us pray.

May the God of peace,
that brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus,
that great shepherd of the sheep,
through the blood of the everlasting covenant,
Make *us* perfect in every good work to do his will,
working in *us* that which is wellpleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ.

Amen.

Hugh Bryant