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Homiletics: Sermon Study on Colossians 1:21-23 for the First Sunday After Trinity

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HOMILETICS

A ROYAL PRIEST — IN ADVANCING HIGHER EDUCATION

The Theme for June. — The theme of the royal priesthood in general receives special working-out on the First Sunday After Trinity in both Epistle and Gospel, the Epistle for the Second Sunday After Trinity, the entire Third Sunday After Trinity. The special theme relating to "Advancing Higher Education" has been set apart through a free text for the First Sunday After Trinity, which takes its cue from the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus, the Gospel of the day, Col. 1:21-23.

Sermon Study on Colossians 1:21-23 for the First Sunday After Trinity

THE TEXT AND ITS SETTING

St. Paul had not founded the church at Colossae and at the time of the Epistle had known of the congregation only through Epaphras. From the second chapter one can infer that the original Gospel faith of the congregation was being distorted in some fashion — through speculation of human reasoning and pondering of nature (v. 8), through repeating of Jewish ordinances (vv. 11-17), and through a worship of angels (v. 18). These false teachings were Jewish in character. On the one hand we confront an ascetic preoccupation with ritual and ordinances, on the other a speculation about the nature of the spirit world and its control over man.

It is probably not in place to assume that in this Epistle St. Paul is directing himself against the first threats of Gnosticism. But the lofty realm of thought and exalted style of the Epistle indicate that St. Paul is addressing himself to people who pride themselves on the use of their minds. Their ritualism and asceticism had a rational premise: it is only reasonable to presume that if we are to be in relation to God, we can best placate Him by keeping the ordinances of the Old Testament and by disciplining our physical bodies. The

speculation concerning angels was an outgrowth "of the rudiments of the world" (2:8, 20). These have been inferred to be heavenly bodies or special angels attached to the heavenly bodies. It seems most reasonable to assume that the Apostle refers to spirits in league with the powers of the world rather than of God and therefore evil angels controlling the flesh of men. The word has also been interpreted to mean simply "first principles" of the world — the basic abilities of reason and desires of the flesh upon which the learning and opinion of natural man is based.

However we interpret "rudiments," we here find St. Paul attacking a thoroughly worldly, but aggressively intellectual mode of thought. The Epistle therefore is most useful for equipping us with the proper spirit and for a true attack upon any confidence in brain or reason or education that by-passes Jesus Christ. Christians have been called together into the body of the Church that they might reinforce each other's faith and life against the inroads of such "rudiments" (3:12-17).

Today's text is the language of a man who in the best sense of the term is playing the part of a royal priest, ministering grace to his fellow Christians that they might stand steadfast in the faith and be satisfied with the truth of the Gospel.

NOTES ON THE TEXT

St. Paul employs the method with which we are familiar also in Ephesians, to address his readers as fellow Christians and by means of a statement of mutual prayer define the faith in which his readers stand with him. Till 1:20 he has pondered the nature of Father and Son and their pre-eminence about all things. Beginning with v. 21, he makes the application of his panorama of redemption to his readers particular and inserts into the application an exhortation to "continue in the faith."

The effect of vv. 16-20 is to bring all things, including the angel world, about which there had been some speculation, under the domain of Jesus Christ. That was accomplished through the "blood of His Cross" (v. 20), but not only angelic "thrones or dominions or principalities or powers" but particularly "the Church," which is the body of Christ, thus comes under the headship of Christ. The net result of that preparation is to lead the reader to inquire for

the relation of Christ to himself rather than for special revelation concerning celestial underlings who ruled him in fantasy.

Vv. 21-22. These words are a quick summary of the more extended statement of Eph. 2:1-10. There the purpose of the section is to convince the readers that they belong to one another whether they are Jew or Gentile. Here the evident intention is to elevate Jesus Christ in their thinking to a supremacy above them. Before their conversion they were foreign and hostile in their "mind," the seat of their spiritual life; in the LXX it is simply the word for "heart." The field in which this hostility toward God and separation from Him worked was that of behavior.

But they have been reconciled. In vv. 19-20 St. Paul said: "It pleased [God] that in Him should all fullness dwell and, having made peace through the blood of His Cross, by Him to reconcile all things unto Himself." Now he brings this reconciliation home to the hearer. Through Christ's work, climaxing on the Cross, the hostility between God and man has been removed. It was done "in the body of His flesh through death." Why the emphasis "in the body of His flesh"? Perhaps St. Paul feels it necessary to stress in the presence of leaders who speculated concerning the angel world, that Christ's redemptive suffering took place in the flesh and blood of one like us, even though He was "the image of the invisible God" (v. 15). The phrase seems a useful means of causing the reader or hearer to concentrate upon the redemptive work — a concentration which is necessary if the Apostle should succeed in achieving his goal of the next words.

The purpose of the redemption of Jesus Christ was to "present you holy and unblamable and unreprouvable in His sight." "Present" is thought to be a word connoting the last Judgment. Yet the redemption in St. Paul's thinking has influences this side of Judgment Day; cf. 3:1-10 and all of the subsequent verses. "Holy" means set apart to God's service and pure; "unblamable" means originally without blemish; "unreprouvable" means in a position that no accounting can be demanded. Altogether this verse seems to denote that the redemption of Jesus Christ puts the Christian man in that perfect relation toward God in which he is set apart for His service and has his sin forgiven. It is that relation which causes the member of the Church of Christ to be completely under the Savior's Lord-

ship. The emphasis "in His sight" seems to bring this discussion into the primary field of man's relation toward God as forgiven and justified rather than the secondary one of his relation toward people in love and purity—although most commemorators prefer the latter significance.

V. 23. "If ye continue" does not have a tentative connotation in the original, but rather expresses a condition which will be fulfilled. But the sentence is useful in stressing the fact that the Christian's faith, his hold on God and confident use of Christ's redemptive work, must be "grounded and settled." Christians must be people established on substantial foundations and able to withstand shocks of unbelief or speculation. Their steadiness must be a resistance against being "moved away from the hope of the Gospel, which ye have heard and which was preached to every creature which is under the heaven." As in 1 Cor. 15:1 ff., St. Paul is here directing himself against the assumption that the Christian Gospel could be amended. The Corinthians were doing it by a misuse of their gift of prophecy, 1 Corinthians 14. The Colossians were doing it by speculations in keeping with the "rudiments of the world" rather than the Spirit of God. The true faith was one which was theirs through the Gospel, which St. Paul had preached. In subsequent verses St. Paul makes much of the divine economy by which he had become Apostle and preacher to them, e. g., vv. 25, 26, 28. He utilizes his position as an Apostle and his reputation as one who brought many to faith in order to emphasize the sufficiency of the Gospel and the hazard of worldly wisdom which seeks to supplant it.

APPLICATION

This text has fruitful applications also without special reference to the "Theme of the Month." Every Christian has his danger of relaxing his grasp on Christ and the saving understanding of the Gospel. Thus he is in danger of losing his relation to God as his Father and to Christ as his Lord.

In the setting of this epistle, however, the words of this text are appropriate as an antidote toward a state of mind which rejoices in its own capacity to create or to judge religious truth. The seventy-five years before World War II were a co-ordinated movement, particularly among the intellectuals of the world, to repudiate the

revealed Gospel of Jesus Christ and to replace it in the life and thought of young and old with products of human reflection. At the moment there are some signs of a revolt against this process, at least among teachers of religion.

How important it is that a Church — and that means each member of the Church as a royal priest — train the future leaders, lay or clerical, of the Church to the attitude that in regard to our life toward God human speculation must be outlawed, in fact, must be suspected of being in league with the Adversary of God, and, instead, the Gospel of Christ's redemption must be made basic for our relation to God and by implication therefore also for our relation to men.

In the setting of this epistle this text can well serve as a follow-up of the educational phase of the "Conquest for Christ" program.

SUGGESTED OUTLINE

Theme: Be Settled in the Faith!

- I. That is the Christian's constant need.
 - A. Of ourselves we are far from God.
 - B. A mind far from God draws upon itself for religious knowledge. 2:8
 - C. But such knowledge is misleading and devilish.
- II. The Christian has a precious faith.
 - A. God has reconciled him to Himself through the death of Jesus Christ.
 - B. Thereby God has made him holy in His sight.
 - C. That is a thing to be accepted by faith.
- III. Continue in that faith!
 - A. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is our source for faith.
 - B. It needs no addition.
 - C. Let us not be moved away from it, but let us cling to it, confess it, and teach and minister it to one another.

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