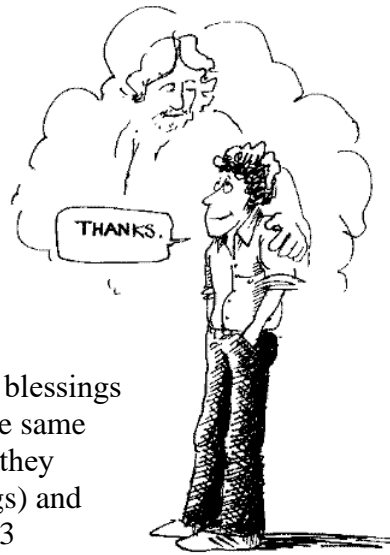


The Fifteenth Sunday of the Year

Ephesians 1:3-14

Ever since the 5th century BC when the Exiles came home to Jerusalem, a great prayer has been said in synagogues everywhere at every daily prayer service. The obligation to pray is unfulfilled unless this prayer is said. It is called the “Shemoneh Esrei”, which means “Eighteen” because of the eighteen blessings it contains. These blessings have the same pattern as the Lord’s Prayer in that they begin with praising God (3 blessings) and go on to ask for daily necessities (13 blessings). They finish by giving thanks (3 blessings). The numbers don’t add up to eighteen because another request was added in the 2nd century AD, not long after the Letter to the Ephesians was written. The extra request concerns the growth of heresy, which at that time meant Christianity.

The prayer begins, “You are holy and your name is holy, and holy ones praise you every day, forever. Blessed are you, the Creator, the holy Lord.” In the second blessing, God is the one who heals the sick, sets prisoners free and helps the fallen to rise up. The third blessing asserts that God can raise people above the ordinariness of the world around to live in his presence. The order and subject of the blessings form a simple account of the history of salvation from creation, through history, to redemption. The hymn prayer at the beginning of the Letter to the Ephesians tells the same story but now that Jesus has completed God’s work of creation and redemption, the bones of the traditional prayer can be fleshed out.



It is sometimes helpful to look at what is denied as well as at what is affirmed in the Pauline letters. This hymn affirms the special place of the Christian community in God’s plan for the world. God, being timeless, chose people to live in his presence even before the world was made (Eph.1:4). Anyone accepting this must deny the Gnostic idea that people had to gain an entry into heaven through their own efforts. The Gnostic determination to release the divine spark in each person from the dark matter that imprisons it makes no sense to people who have been made to live freely with God from the beginning.

There was no one group of people that could be called Gnostic; rather, the Gnostics were those people in the early Christian communities who found it hard to accept that Jesus had done all the work of redemption. It offended their pride to think that people, whether rich or poor, practical, academic, or whatever, only have to accept the Good News, turn to God and relax in his presence. They would rather make great efforts of their own to achieve an enlightenment that would inevitably open heaven to them. This hymn denies that thought and affirms “the richness of the grace which God has showered upon us in all wisdom and insight.” (Eph.1:8) The original words imply that the degree of God’s generosity is prodigious, beyond all possible expectation and entirely remarkable. It is so far over the top that exaggeration is impossible.

Many Gnostics imagined an order of things that had God, unknowable and completely separate from creation, at the top; angels next; then Jesus; then the enlightened Gnostics. Common folk were at the bottom. This hymn denies that by placing Jesus Christ at the centre of everything. God is not separate; he is present in the world through Jesus who connects people to God. The Good News is simply that it is possible to live completely with God because of Jesus. The hymn says that this was God’s “predetermined plan” from the beginning. In other words, this is the way God intended his creation to be. As anyone who has built an extension to their house knows, predetermined plans are not a guarantee of the way things will work out; but in this case Christ guarantees that God’s intentions for the world are becoming a reality. The Jewish prayer, Shemoneh Esrei, has been answered.