

Trouble and strife: 1 Corinthians 7.25-40

I do want to point out, friends, that time is of the essence. There is no time to waste, so don't complicate your lives unnecessarily. Keep it simple — in marriage, grief, joy, whatever. Even in ordinary things — your daily routines of shopping and so on. Deal as sparingly as possible with the things the world thrusts on you. This world as you see it is on its way out. ...

*I want you to live as free from complications as possible. ... I'm trying to be helpful and make it as easy as possible for you, not make things harder. All I want is for you to be able to develop a way of life in which you can spend plenty of time together with the Master without a lot of distractions. 1 Cor 7.26-31 & 35, *The Message*.*

Keep it simple? That's rich, you might be thinking, coming from one of the most complicated chapters written by one of the most complex minds of the New Testament. But I think Eugene Peterson (who produced *The Message Bible*) has got this one right. For Paul, all these complicated regulations about our sex lives — and other aspects of our lives — come down to something very simple in the end. Does it bring me closer to God? If I do this, will it help me — and my sisters and brothers and neighbours — live in a way that brings us closer to the kingdom of God, to God's vision of how the world should be? Or will it push us further apart and make it more difficult for other people to recognize the signs of God's presence? Does my daily life allow me to spend time with the Master, sitting at his feet like Mary — or am I constantly distracted, like Martha (Luke 10.38-42)?

What brings this to life for Paul is that he really does believe that the time is running out — *the fashion of this world is passing away* (v.31). The whole complex, colourful life of the city, the day-to-day business of buying and selling, marrying and giving in marriage, is under curfew. The match is already in injury time: whatever happens, it'll soon be over. So the instructions he gives here are strictly temporary — emergency regulations for the present crisis.

But the Corinthians have some very pressing and practical questions — questions that need answers. This whole chapter is a series of answers to the questions they asked in their letter (v.1). In fact the chapter begins with a quote from their letter: “It is well for a man not to touch a woman” almost certainly isn’t Paul being repressive (or repressed) but a suggestion from Corinth. It may even be a question: *Is it OK to abstain from sex — even if you’re married?*

We’ve already seen in chapters 5 and 6 two kinds of sexual relationship that don’t bring us closer to God: incest (sex that abuses the trust on which family life is built) and prostitution (sex as a commercial transaction). So maybe some of the Corinthians were thinking, is it sex itself that’s the problem? Would we be closer to God if we gave up sex altogether? Is it better to avoid sexual relationships if you want to live a life of holiness “without distractions”?

Many Christians down the ages have argued that the celibate life is the best way to achieve holiness. Paul himself has some sympathy with that viewpoint (v.7): he sounds a bit like my uncle Peter, a confirmed bachelor who always said he never wanted to marry because his work as a solicitor had shown him what a lot of trouble marriage causes. Paul’s reasons are practical, rather than theological. Like many of the older missionary societies (in living memory), he believed that the life of a travelling missionary wasn’t one for a married man or woman (though the apostle Peter travelled about with his wife! — see 9.5).

And, interestingly, his answer opens up the possibility of seeing singleness as a valid and fulfilling way of life, dedicated to God’s service, both for men and for women. And that was quite revolutionary in Paul’s day — especially for women, who had very few lifestyle options outside marriage. Even his final advice to widows not to remarry (vv.39-40) can be taken as a liberating option for widows in a society where women were treated as the disposable property of their fathers and husbands. Christians who argue that married life is

the only option for Christians need to take another look at Paul (and Jesus!).

But — equally important — Paul also affirms the validity of marriage — and of sex within marriage — as a way of life that promotes holiness and brings us closer to God. If a married couple want to have a temporary “fast” from sex (that’s what v.5 is about), that’s OK — but don’t deprive each other except by agreement, and don’t try to keep it up too long — no room for spiritual heroics! If an engaged couple want to get married (vv.36-38), *go ahead and marry. It’s no sin — it’s not even a “step down” from celibacy, as some say. Marriage is spiritually and morally right and not inferior to singleness in any way.*

His basic message seems to be: it’s fine to not be married. But if you are married, then for Heaven’s sake do the job properly! Don’t try and play games with your partner in a kind of spiritual one-up-man-ship. “Pleasing your partner,” attending to the other’s needs — and this is a two-way thing, it applies to men as much as to women — is actually what marriage is all about. If that’s the way of life you choose, then that’s where holiness lies for you.

The revolutionary aspect of this comes out most clearly in the question of mixed marriages (vv.12-16). If holiness matters (and if it’s important, as Paul says, in the body and not just in the soul), what about Christians who are married to unbelieving partners? Don’t these unions also create a channel for impurity to enter the body of Christ (cf. 6.15)? Clearly this was a matter of deep concern to many Christians in Corinth. But Paul’s extraordinary answer is that within marriage, the sexual relationship actually has the reverse effect: far from threatening the holiness of the community, sex within marriage reverses the purity force-field. Holiness is not a weak, defenceless quality which needs to be protected against infection. On the contrary, it’s an active, vital force which “infects” (or better, protects) the unbelieving partner in the marriage, and even the children (7.14). Quite what this means theologically is perhaps something we could reflect on more than we do. C.S.Lewis may have something like this in

mind when he makes Screwtape complain of a Christian household that “The whole place reeks of that deadly odour. ... Even guests, after a week-end visit, carry some of the smell away with them.”

So where does that leave us today? We might reflect that it’s just as well the Corinthians didn’t follow Paul’s advice and keep everything on hold because of what might happen tonight — or tomorrow — or next week. Because of course it didn’t — not in Paul’s lifetime. Keeping things on hold just won’t work. Life goes on, people get married and get new jobs, children are born and have birthdays and start new schools, people get sick and need care.

Living in the awareness of impending change — of a way of life under judgement — is something we’re getting used to. But it’s no use putting your life on hold. What we have to do is to get on with the life that God has given us now — with all its stresses and delights; trying to meet its demands and obligations with love and graciousness, with faith and hope. Making the most of the opportunity to draw close to God in the life that he has given us. That’s the secret of holiness: “We are always praying, when we are doing our duty and turning it into work for God” (Père Grou).

God bless,
Loveday

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PS: Last week’s novel was *Anna Karenina*, of course. But you knew that didn’t you?