

Homily – Sunday 9th June 2019 – 6 pm

In the course of a discussion about marriage at theological college, a good friend of mine explained that he had been given some rather unexpected advice during his own marriage preparation. His Vicar had suggested that every morning he should remind himself that he was choosing to be married to his wife. Now, to set some context, my friend came from quite a conservative church tradition, and therefore expected to be told about the gravity of the commitment he was making, and that it could not be broken. The idea that he should be making a choice each morning was surprising to him. And yet it was something for which he was always thankful. First because it made him think more carefully about his relationship – on an ongoing basis. And second because it was a guard against any tendency to resentment. If this was a choice he was making daily, then by definition there couldn't be any sense of, "you've made your bed, now you must lie in it."

The conversation left me thinking about where this advice might be helpful, and where less so. For some people marriage offers an important sense of security. To set as a foundation the sense in which it is a decision that cannot be reversed might help some in building a strong relationship. A sense of daily choice could create anxiety. We all know, too, that any relationship has its ups and downs. Perhaps we can see the danger in that sense of a daily choice that a marriage could come to an end simply because someone doesn't feel like it that day. Within any relationship there is a need for a balance between security and freedom – a balance worked out together.

Whenever we hear the words of St. Paul, it is so important to remember the context in which he was speaking. Taken out of context – both the context in which they were written, and the wider context of what we know about Paul's theology – the words of this evening's epistle could lead us to draw some rather alarming conclusions. The Old Testament reading speaks of those extraordinary occasions where Moses met with God in the tent of meeting. There is such a sense of awe and wonder among the Israelites. We know that Moses constantly questions his calling, but he continues to communicate with God. In the next chapter, Moses will meet God on Mount Sinai when he receives the ten commandments. Afterwards his face is shining so brightly that he covers it with a veil.

If we are not careful, we could hear Paul's words, and think that he is criticising all that we have just heard in Exodus. That for Paul, the Jewish tradition is of no consequence in the light of Jesus's life, death, resurrection and ascension, not to mention the sending of the Holy Spirit.

But that is not what Paul is saying at all. Indeed, Paul believed that the law came from God – and that it should be obeyed. He is actually forming his argument in a way that would have been very familiar at the time. It is a construction which goes from the weaker point to the stronger point – if the weaker is true, then the stronger must be even more true. So, if glory could come out of the law – and he believed it did – how much more might glory come out of the Spirit? Paul's arguments follow very much from Jesus's own words, that he came not to abolish the law, but to fulfil it.

When I first hear Paul's words in this evening's reading, it feels just a little too much like confident swagger. And that is, once again, where context is so important. All the evidence we have suggests that the Corinthians were far from model citizens. Paul had no end of trouble with them, and spends much time in his letters chastising them for their errors. And yet he is still compelled to remind them of the confidence that they can have in Christ.

When I think about the conversation I had with my friend about the advice he received before he got married, I am reminded of that challenge for anyone offering that kind of advice. The challenge of knowing how complicated relationships are and that they need work and attention; or desperately wanting that to work; and of also knowing that sometimes it doesn't work, and somehow we want to maintain the lines of communication whether things are going well or badly. Our relationship with God is just like that – a live relationship in which things can feel good, bad or indifferent at any given time. The difference being that God's love remains constant.

Paul is absolutely sure of God's love for humanity, and equally sure that if we allow the Holy Spirit into our lives, we will be transformed. He is passionate about his cause, knowing the extent of God's grace and the transformative power of God's love. But he also knows that he is working with real people and that sometimes they get it wrong. That sometimes – perhaps all too often – they are drawn into immoral practices which seem just a little bit too appealing.

There is a lot in Paul's letters that I find difficult, but what I love is his absolute passion and conviction. He can be ruthless in chastising people – but it is because he knows that allowing the Holy Spirit to dwell in their lives will be transformative. He can seem to wax lyrical about the life the Spirit give, making it sound easy, when a life of faith is anything but (as he knew all too well), but it is because he never doubted that it was worth the sacrifice.

Paul was a real person speaking to real people. I rather suspect that he hadn't necessarily had the kind of training currently offered in human psychology, but his combination of chastising, praising, giving thanks and inspiring are common tools for most leaders. What Paul knew was that if we let God into our lives – if we allow the Holy Spirit to dwell within us – that is when we will truly live. And that is the challenge – and inspiration – for us this Pentecost.

Amen