

Epiphany 2
17/1/2021

Mark the Evangelist

1 Samuel 3:1-10

Psalm 139

1 Corinthians 6:12-20

John 1:43-51

Faith, Flesh, and Freedom

Sermon preached by Matt Julius

*God, may my words be loving and true; and may those who listen discern what is not.
Amen.*

We are currently in the season of Epiphany. The season in the Christian year when we attend to the manifestation of Christ to all people. This is the period of the Christian calendar when we reflect on what it means for God to be made visible in Jesus of Nazareth. What it means that God's creative works find their centre in Jesus the Christ, from whom radiates the light of the world. This is a season in which we see the God whose pulsating life forms and sustains the world enmeshed within that created order itself. The God who forms us in our mother's wombs has also been formed in a mother's womb; the God whose knowledge of us is wonderful and high has now become intimate with poverty and lowliness. It is in this way, in this person — Jesus of Nazareth — that we see God most fully. This is the manifestation, the revelation of God which epiphany invites us to consider.

Just how remarkable this claim about God is can be seen in how long it took the Christian church to truly understand it. Of course in many ways that God becomes human, becomes a part of God's own creation in Jesus is a mystery which we are still unravelling. But pointedly we can see this in the early debates of the church leading up to the councils of Nicea and Constantinople. There church leaders argued whether or not it would diminish God to be found fully in the created man Jesus of Nazareth. Those who opposed the divinity of Jesus probably saw themselves as the defenders of God's dignity: surely God, who is above and before all creation, could not bear the indignity of being enmeshed in flesh and blood. God could be represented by a created being, by this one Jesus Christ, as the greatest and clearest manifestations of God in the world; but this could not be God fully found in the flesh.

It is against this that the church emphatically affirmed the full divinity of Jesus in the teaching of the Trinity. Jesus is in fact fully God:

God from God
Light from Light
True God from True God

This is the case even while we confess that he was born of Mary, made human, lived a life marked by history, and died. God is not diminished in freedom or in dignity by being found in the human one Jesus Christ. Rather than making our understanding of Jesus conform to

our received assumptions about God, our tradition calls us to always set our assumptions about God alongside Jesus — in whom we see God most fully.

This is important to bear in mind as we consider Paul's ethical teaching in our reading from the First letter to the Corinthians. I want to suggest that key to Paul's ethical teaching here is an account of freedom which is bound up with the world of bodies, and our concrete lives in creation. Paul's ethical teaching cannot be understood without reference back to Jesus, who lived in the messy world of bodies, and food, and flesh.

Paul sets his teaching against what appear to be slogans well known among the Corinthian community:

"All things are lawful for me!"

"But," says Paul, "not all things are beneficial ... and I will not be dominated by anything"

"Food is meant for the stomach and the stomach for food."

"But," says Paul, "God will destroy both."

These slogans, seemingly well-known enough for Paul to quote, represent an account of freedom which Paul seeks to challenge. It's impossible to get fully behind the text to know exactly what issues are at play in the Corinthian community. Nevertheless, we get the sense that some in the community have taken the teaching that Jesus frees us from being bound by the law to an unhelpful extreme. Rather than calling us to faithfully share in the way of Jesus the proponents of these slogans—

"All things are lawful ... Food is meant for the body!"

The proponents of these slogans seem to have taken the freedom Jesus offers us to mean that what we do with our bodies no longer matters. We are free, and this freedom means we can do whatever we desire to do. At first glance, then, the manner in which Paul challenges these slogans seems obvious. Against the permissive, "Yes!" these slogans suggest, old moralistic Paul is heard offering a stern, "No!"

Undoubtedly the Apostle Paul would express rather strong moral convictions were he with us here today — views which might seem strange 2000 years later, and in a part of the world unknown to him. But I want to suggest that what we see in Paul's ethical vision First Corinthians 6 is richer, and more life affirming than the common moralism for which Paul is usually known.

Paul's moral lesson here is expressed primarily with the language of bodies — and even the intimate acts of bodies. Within Paul's broader corpus the language of bodies primarily functions as a metaphor for the community of faith. Most famously later in this same letter: where Paul talks of the church as a body with many parts, each with their own role to play. Here, however, the focus of the body language Paul invokes is not the diversity of the Christian community, but rather its call to united faithfulness.

"The body," this community, "is meant not for fornication," that is, intimate unfaithfulness, "but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body." (v13b) As Paul continues, drawing on the language of prostitution, this point is extended. We should think back to Paul's own scriptures (what we receive as the texts of the Old Testament), and the ways in which

prophets also used the language of prostitution as a metaphor for Israel's unfaithfulness to God. Paul, like the prophets before him, is calling us back to God.

There are layers of meaning operating at the same time here. At one level the body is the church, and Paul is warning the church against unfaithfulness. At another level, our literal bodies — our world of flesh and blood and our encounters with others— is the very stuff with which we are to express our faithfulness: while Paul is using metaphoric language, he is not *only* using metaphoric language. The reference to the raising of Jesus' body ties these two layers together: in the fact that God becomes incarnate in flesh and blood we know surely that our bodies matter, that our concrete world of flesh and blood is the domain of God's redemptive work: our embodied lives are the tools with which we express obedience to God; alongside this, that God breathes new life into the dead flesh of Jesus, opening possibilities for newness beyond what ordinary flesh and blood seems capable, suggests a new order of creation into which we are all, collectively called.

The language of prostitution in this passage, then, *may* contribute to our views on contemporary sex work. But we should be wary of missing the deeper lesson which is also being taught here. I think we should be wary about too quickly using texts like today's reading to reinforce the stigma experienced by contemporary sex workers. Regardless of what we might think about sex work today, we should be careful when we read scripture not to avoid how its words challenge us by instead turning the words towards others. Indeed the insights of some contemporary sex work activists can provide helpful insight as we think about what Paul's teaching might mean for us today.

Setting aside what the Christian tradition might want to say about contemporary sex work, many sex work advocates point out a common pitfall of attempts to reform the sex work industry. Namely, that such attempts are not built upon relationships with people working in the industry, and so do not treat such workers with the dignity which they are due. This is a helpful insight, again, not because it *necessarily* leads us to a clear view of this industry as a whole, or different aspects of it. But rather because it reminds us that the work of moral discernment, to which the new reality of Christ's resurrection calls us, must be done in the concrete terms of real relationships, of real communities. It is precisely in this concrete, embodied work that Christ continues to work.

It is this which Paul's letter teaches us today — and perhaps why it is set along other stories of God's calling and our human response. That our response to God's calling is enacted precisely in the circumstances in which we find ourselves: the world of our bodies, of our concrete everyday lives. That our response to God's calling is discovered through faith-filled communities, filled with the Spirit. That our response to God is not first and foremost found in our ability to be perfect: neither in a divine, "no!", nor a simplistic, "yes!" to everything. But rather, we respond to God in being willing to learn from each other, holding together as one body, here and now. This is the life-giving message Paul offers us that: that the Lord is for the body: this collective body, and your individual body. This is where God's redemptive work takes place, this is where the light of Christ shines. In our bodies, beautiful and bold. To the glory of God eternal.
