

Pentecost 15
5/9/2021

Mark the Evangelist

Ephesians 5:8-16
Psalm 146
Mark 7:24-37

Bodies, souls and morals

In a sentence
What we do reflects what we think we are

‘Live as children of the light’, Paul says, ‘...Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness.’

Plucked out of context like this, this scripture passage says everything, and nothing. It says everything, in that all the bases are covered: what else is there but ‘light’ and ‘darkness’ as options, the yin and yang of life choices? It says nothing, in that it does not tell us what ‘light’ and ‘darkness’ actually look like when it comes to making those choices. And so, in the end, the little section we have heard from Ephesians this morning is, by itself, not very *interesting*. There is nothing here to *engage* us. We might say that it is so right that it’s really not worth saying.

But when we look at what comes before and after these verses, we see that two of the things Paul addresses more specifically are sex and heavy drinking. And these things are of *great* interest to us – or some of us, at least. Because they are more interesting, we’ll think together a bit about them this morning to illuminate a little more what is at stake in what we do being ‘light’ or ‘darkness’.

We get nowhere if we reduce Paul’s direction to mere moral decision, in the sense of *our* moral decisions over against *Paul’s*. Morality is more than the choices we make. Paul does not simply say ‘Do this, don’t do that’ for us to agree with him or not. Rather he says, Understand what you are, and be reconciled to that.

The question is, then, *What is a human being* such that casual sex and getting drunk might violate not simply the moral code of some god but our very being?

Concerning sex, and contrary to the dominant understanding today, what is important for faith is not that we *have* bodies with which we might do this or that, but that we *are* bodies. The difference is subtle but very important. To *have* a body is to be somehow separated from it, somehow for the ‘real’ me to dwell within my body so that whatever happens to my body doesn’t quite happen to ‘me’. Consequently, if I give my body or take yours in sexual exchange, neither of us need really, wholly, be there.

This is not the understanding behind Paul’s exhortations here. Our bodies are not merely fleshy appendages to our true selves but are so tightly intertwined with our inner being that what happens to the one happens to the other. Contrary to the modern split of mind from body, it is indeed our whole selves which the Scripture understands to be caught up in sex and not ‘just’ our bodies. The joining of bodies is also a joining of souls, just as the loss of our body is the loss of our soul.

The question then becomes: Can what is joined this way be casually separated again? Scripturally the answer is no, not without radical damage, if there was a true joining.

Yet, for perhaps most of us, this doesn't feel like a radical and damaging rupture in what we are – a 'work of darkness', as Paul puts it – because the lights have already gone out long before we get to this point. The base problem is not the sex but the division of spirit and body, which runs right through us as individuals and as communities. The manifestation of this division in the way modern society encourages us to treat sex is just one of many ways it affects us. If you imagine that when you die, your body stops but some other part of you keeps going, you are caught in the same misconception about what it means to be human. Whatever the scriptural talk of death and resurrection means, it is not that when our bodies die our spirits give up their tenancy and continue on. When the body dies, so does the spirit. And you stay dead until God says otherwise.

At another level, any political or ethical strategy in which it is implied that the end justifies the means similarly divides bodies from souls, suggesting that only the souls really matter and the bodies can be done with as we like. The frustrations of COVID lockdowns are the effect of limiting the movement of bodies on minds and souls; what must be happening to the spirits of bodies locked in refugee detention centres or behind similar walls? The concern for justice is the recognition that bodies break souls.

In moving from sex to death to politics and justice we're not losing our topic. Rather, debates about the so-called 'morals' of sex are not merely a matter of who says what about what I can do with 'my' body. The point is, *What am I?* What makes a human person human? And when do my decisions and actions draw me away from what I have been created to be? The same principles are at play in the righteousness of personal conduct as in the justice of conduct in community.

Whatever sense of intimacy and closeness it might seem to promise, the mere feels-good approach to sex is – at the deeper level of the being and needs of each of us – as much a matter of *denying* myself and the one I am with, as it is affirming some felt need. This is the case whether in or out of marriage. From the point of view of Scripture, we are simply confused here: the contemporary 'celebration' of our 'embodiment' through sexual liberation also denies that our bodies are really *us*.

For the sake of not going on much longer we'll not spend too much time on what Paul says about drunkenness, but the same kind of issue is operating. As bad as the health and broader social impacts of drunkenness might be, Paul's focus here is how the one who drinks herself to excess is expressing her humanity. Working a pun, he draws a contrast between filling ourselves with strong spirits and being filled with the Spirit of God. Here the problem he addresses is not so much the body as our desire to displace the Spirit which gives life with some other spirit, denying again what we are given to be by replacing it with something else.

The moral guidelines Paul puts here are not anti-sex or anti-alcohol. More deeply, the question is, In what does our humanity reside and what kinds of behaviour accord with that? Paul's interests in his moral teaching are not merely what we do but what we are intended to be, and how we are more fully to become that kind of creature.

Of course, on both the simple moral reading, and the deeper theological one I've suggested, the teaching looks the same – don't sleep around and don't get drunk. In both cases it sounds like a 'No' to things some might prefer at least to be free to do, should we want to.

It can only be a 'No' on the merely moral reading. There is here really only darkness. But, on the deeper theological reading, the No is preceded by a Yes. The Yes is an affirmation of both our spirits *and* our bodies as fundamental to what we are. It is the 'Yes' which affirms the 'resurrection of the body' – our bodies in the Body of Christ – whatever that might ultimately look like. This 'Yes' declares that even what seems to threaten us most – the loss of our bodies and spirits in death – does not have ultimate sway. The 'Yes' of the gospel is a light by which we see God's faithfulness to the world as he has created it. We are created as truly spirited bodies which have their fullest life when my connection to others – my *reconciliation* to others – matches my reconciliation to the connection of my own body and heart.

The 'Yes' God speaks is the gift of God's own Spirit in the risen Body of Christ, given that our minds and bodies might be reconciled – within us and between us.

It is simply for us to pray and act towards the enlivening of our bodies and spirits through what God has promised, and to look for that new life in relationships and actions which reflect God's own faithfulness to body and to spirit.

Let us, then, so pray and act: as children of light.
